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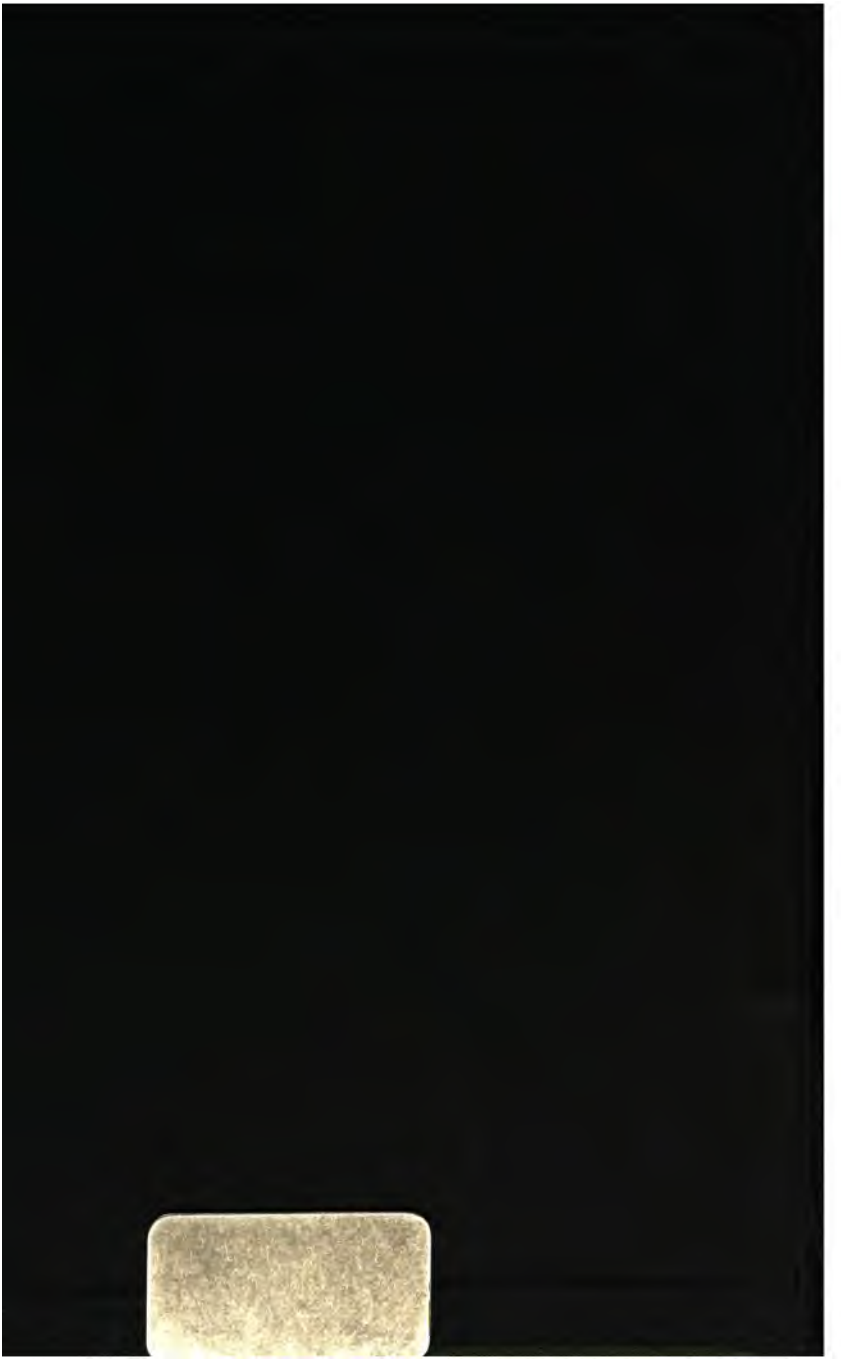

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CHAPTER I.

"MISS HARMAN!"

He spoke rapidly, and in a trembling voice, putting out his hand as if to stop her from escape. Meg let his hand rest without resistance on her arm, and looked up with a strange trembling glance into his face.

"Oh, Mr. Arlathnot."

No more—indeed after those first words they had neither of them strength to speak. They stood still—his hand still rested on her arm, and the crowd moved and pushed them as it passed.

"Let us come somewhere else," said Arlathnot, "where we can be more quiet than this."

And then—as if he feared she might give some meaning he had not intended to his words—

"You may trust me. . . . I have no wish to compel you—I will not tell your

friends of you unless you like—only I entreat you to give me leave to speak with you."

Meg gave no reply in words, but as he dropped his slight touch upon her arm, she took his arm between both her hands. In that moment of excitement she was scarcely conscious what she did, but he felt at once the nervous energy of her small fingers grasp as a swimmer knows the drowning clutch that seeks its last hope in him.

Guiding her as best he could whilst she still held his arm, he forced his way through the crowd till they reached a bench against the wall. On this she dropped as if she had reached the last exhaustion of fatigue, whilst he stood by her side.

"This is very cold for you," he said. "Shall we not try to find some warmer place? Or"—as he observed her condition "perhaps you are almost too tired to move."

"If you would like to go and see," said Meg, "I will wait till you come back."

Another man might have suspected her, or at least have been afraid to take her at her

word. Arlathnot had too much chivalry for that. Yet his heart smote him with sharp misgivings as, with a promise to return in a minute, he turned away.

Happily he had not far to go. At that station, as at many others, he had acquaintances, and before long he met with a friendly porter, who promised to guide him to such a place as he required. The first bench he passed as he retraced his steps was entirely empty, and a sudden terror held his breath, but looking on towards the next he saw her there in the same drooping attitude as before. Meg had been scarcely conscious of thought whilst those few moments passed; all seemed like a dream, and this strange interview that her younger life had sought so much was only part of that.

"This man will show us a better place," said Arlathnot cheerfully, as he came once more to her. "But we shall have to cross the bridge, he says."

Then, as she rose wearily and obediently, he added with tenderness —

"Take my arm whenever you are tired."

He would have insisted on giving it to her at once, but an instinct in him would not allow him to do anything that might make her seem dragged like a captive at his side. The same instinct made him walk on a little in front with the porter, hearing her light footsteps behind him all the way up and down the bridge.

To Meg those long, weary steps seemed like the difficult climbing we get through in a dream, but she kept her eyes on the tall figure she followed through the gloom. The lights of the town, spread out far beneath them, were passed after a while, the descending steps were passed, and she walked now on the platform by his side.

The porter led them some way, then down a passage, and then into a little room where a fire was burning. There were bare boards, a few wooden chairs, a table, and, opposite the fire, a bench that had a back. She sat down on that. Arlathnot went to the door, to speak to the man, probably to pay him

and to ask him to call him in an hour, as soon as his train came in. Then he came back and sat down on the other end of the bench. The door was shut, and they were alone.

"Will you not take off your hat? It is so wet," he said.

She obeyed mechanically, and the firelight shone on the damp curling hair that clung round her forehead, making her look much younger now. So he seemed to think, for he gazed at her with some surprise, and then turned away his head with a heavy sigh. Still, for a while he would not speak: he took off his hat and laid it on the ground, he rested an elbow on the arm of the bench, and laid his face upon his hand. Meg was only vaguely conscious of the narrow, worn features and thin grey hair on which the firelight shone. She knew that, put it off as he might, the moment of explanation must be close at hand, and in terror of that she dared not brave her companion's glance. Only, at last, some nervous fascination made her

turn her face to him, and she saw at once that his eyes were fixed on her.

"You wicked child," he said, "where have you been hiding all this while, whilst we have been at so much pains for you?"

Arlathnot had a peculiar power and gentleness in his glance, as I have said—the varying colours of his eyes united in a dark soft light not easily described. But the tone in which he spoke had no searching reproof to give—it was only playful and tender; Meg had not known till that moment how hard to bear even tenderness can be. She hid her face within her hands.

"Oh, don't cry, pray don't cry," he said, as he saw her shoulders shaken by her sobs. And in some impatient distress he got up and walked up and down the room. Restraining that nervous movement he sat down once more by her. "Do comfort yourself," he said, as gently as he could, "and think only if I can be of any help to you."

He spoke so gently that she dared to put down her hands at last.

"It is only—only—that you are so kind to me," she said.

"And is it so strange," he said smiling," "for anyone to be kind to you?"

Meg gave no answer, only looked with entreating eyes at him. He bent towards her as he spoke.

"Meg—if you will let me call you so—will you not tell me some way in which to help you now?"

Still silence. Perhaps it came into his mind that this strange dreamlike interview must soon be drawing to a close, and that he must not waste the time, for his tone was sterner when he spoke.

"Meg," he said, "when I used to see you in old times you were a little child in your father's home, a little curly-haired child whom I used to take upon my knee. Do you think it is pleasant to me to see you now again after all these years have passed, and to see you so alone and unprotected, still almost a child in years, but with that hard, care-worn look of a woman on your

face, that sad wasted look that ought never to belong to such years as yours? There must be something that is not right in this. You are on a wrong path; you have taken your life into your own hands before you had years or wisdom with which to guide yourself. You have done wrong, and you have too much pride even to own it now."

There was silence, and then Meg raised her face and spoke passionately —

"I should never have left them if they had only been kind to me."

"Had you no friends, no relations, no one to advise you or to help, that you must rush out by yourself into the world? If you were unhappy, as you say, could you not have waited and asked advice at least?"

"I did mean to; indeed, I did," cried Meg. "I had been meaning to through all the years. I should never have gone from home if it had not been" —

And here she stopped, and he could only see her drooping eyes and the deep burning flush upon her face.

"For you."

"For *me?*" he echoed in amazement.

"I can't tell it all to you," cried Meg. "You couldn't care to hear it all from me. But I had been thinking of you through all the years. I had heard my father say, when he was dying, that he was sure you would be kind to me. And I thought if I could only see . . . you would tell me . . . what I ought to do. . . . And then you came at last, and you said you did not remember, and you did not seem as if you would give any help to me" —

Mr. Arlathnot was silent, contracting his brows, and clenching the hand that rested against his cheek, whilst his eyes assumed the vacant look of one who is lost in some thought or surprise. His brow was still knitted as with pain, and his voice was harsh and even grating when he spoke.

"Do you think, then, that there can be no trouble in all the world but yours?"

After a while —

"On that day you saw me I had heard that my son was dead."

Silence.

"Dead!" faltered Meg. "Oh, I am so sorry; I never knew of that. What was I thinking of that day? And your son too! It was I who ought to have thought for you."

Arlathnot had turned very pale with the effort his last words had cost, but through that faintness he could hear the tones of her voice, and see the lifted blue eyes and the tears standing upon her cheeks. That roused him, and with an effort he recovered himself enough to speak.

"I was half-mad that day, I think," he said in a low voice. "I had been anxious for so long, and I knew then that I ought not to hope again. I daresay I was selfish then. We all get so blinded with our troubles—when they are hard for us to bear."

His eyes, though tearless, looked almost blinded now.

"Oh, no, no," whispered Meg, "it was I who was bad, and selfish, and wicked—as I

always am. And I used to hear about your son." In a lower whisper that scarcely seemed to stir the air—"Are you alone, then?"

"Yes, quite alone."

She gave no answer, but took his hand and pressed it. Arlathnot felt the timid touch of her small soft palms, and it almost broke down his composure into tears. But he restrained himself. The moment's agitation was good for him, for it disturbed the dreary blankness of feeling that now after so many months was beginning to steal over him again.

He looked earnestly at her. The gleam of the flames was on her face, on the blue eyes, so full of wonder and sadness in their thoughts for him, on the parted lips, and on the bright curling hair, almost dried now, that would not be smooth upon her head. His own dream for her could not but be present to his mind, but it came less distinctly than before—here by her side he recognised that, childish as her careworn face

still looked, she was a living human being with a will and character of her own, and that no idea of his could dispose of her life for her. And that thought brought back at once to his mind the terror he had felt before. The time was not long that he had in which to talk to her.

"Come, I will not speak of myself," he said with a faint smile, "I am so much older that things do not signify for me. And after all you and I are wrong, for we are not alone—never alone—we must always remember that. And now there is one thing I have to say to you."

He paused here, and touched her shoulder gently with the hand he laid on it.

"Shall I tell you, Meg, what I think you ought to do?"

"Yes," she whispered, as she turned to look at him.

"You ought to go back to your uncle's house."

There was silence.

"You should go back to him, you should

tell him you are grateful for all the care he has spent on you, that you are sorry for the trouble you have given him, and for this last greatest trouble most of all. And then, if he will allow you, you should make up your mind that you will live with him again."

He waited a little to see what effect on her his words might have. He felt her shoulder tremble a little beneath his touch, but her eyes were downcast now, and he could not see the resisting passion that surged up into them, or hear the wild "I will not," that rose almost to her lips. She raised her face to say those words to him, but, as she met his glance, her courage failed.

Perhaps it would have been well if she had spoken, he had no means of knowing all that passed within her mind, and though he saw trouble and even resistance in her eyes, he felt his influence too. Releasing her shoulder he bent his head to look at her.

"You do not like this, Meg," he said.

But Meg was silent.

"You are a very obstinate child," he said,

with a smile that rose into his eyes. "Well, try and think if you can tell me more about yourself, and then I shall have more power to judge for you. It seems impertinent in me, doesn't it? to ask about your affairs, but I should like so much to help you."

But Meg was silent, sitting straight up now, with her small hands folded, and her eyes looking before her, and fixed and thoughtful as they looked. Then, with the same strange composure, she turned to him —

"Mr. Arlathnot," she said, "before I tell you all that I can about myself, there are two things I should like to say to you."

"Say them."

"I want to say first," she said, meeting his earnest glance with eyes as earnest as his own "that though I should not have left my uncle's house, in the way I did, no one will ever know all that could be said for me. I should not have been ungrateful if only one of them had been kind to me."

The deep, sad earnestness of her tone sank into Arlathnot's ears and heart; he often heard the echoes of those words in the after years.

"And there is one other thing I wish to say," she said, still sitting straight, with folded hands, and speaking in the same strange, quiet manner, though her cheeks grew paler as she spoke; "I have heard—I believe it is true—that they say bad things sometimes of girls who run away from home. I want you to believe that there is nothing bad in me. I think there never could be in all my life. If it were not so, if I felt there was anything wrong in me to tell you now—I —I— I should not be sitting at your side, I I should be lying at your feet."

The choked, strangled passion of the last words made them scarcely to be heard. Arlathnot heard with wonder, and with pain, and yet with a feeling that his worst dread had found relief now. He applied himself to soothing and consoling her. Then, when he saw that she was quiet again —

"Will you tell me something now?" he said.

"I cannot tell you all," she answered, meeting his eyes, and scarcely knowing what she meant by the words as she said them.

"Tell me all you can."

So, brokenly, as the words came to her, she told her story, whilst the firelight shone upon them both, and he listened and waited as she spoke or was silent, with his eyes always fixed on her, but always without a word. Perhaps it was a greater comfort to speak than she had known; she soon found herself telling more than she had ever thought to do. Slowly the scenes came back to her, the hot morning on which she had walked by the river with the cathedral on the hill beyond, the old lady, and Dick, and the schoolboy, the little town, with the evening shadows falling across it, and the poplars in the streets. And then, more brokenly, and more vaguely, she told of work, loneliness, cold, wasting money, want of sympathy and strength, and want of

hope, the dreary details that made up her living now. She seemed to be speaking in a dream, her lips trembled sometimes so that she could hardly move them, yet she went on speaking still. And it comforted her. Was it strange, then, or was it natural that, telling so much, she should yet leave so much unrevealed? Of the young artists she scarcely spoke, of Holbis, and the decision she had promised to make that very night, she said no word at all. It seemed to her that she could not; her lips refused even to utter the words when she tried to form them. Was this strange concealment caused by shame, or modesty, or that revulsion against speaking of what touches us most nearly, or the unknown desire lurking beneath all these things to have still in her own hands the power of deciding as she would? She did not know, she knew only that of these things she was silent.

Arlathnot, sitting always in his old attitude, with his face against his hand, and keeping on her the bright vivid glance, that

had no veiling blindness to obscure it now, knew at once, by the aid of experience of years, that she was keeping something hid from him. That experience had made him acquainted with many sad stories that he had tried to help; he had no difficulty in imagining reasons for reserve. And these reasons made him all the more ready to suppose that she would be ready to be saved by him. It is in this way that experience becomes more misleading than ignorance sometimes.

After all, in many respects, he heard enough—the sad story of desperate work, and want, and need, wilfully caused, deserved, perhaps, as it was, went to his very heart as he heard—over and over again he longed to end it by opening out all his heart to her, and taking her to that and to his home at once. Only he could not—his promise to his friend was in his ears; and, besides, he was on his way to an acquaintance, an old and lonely bachelor, who was ill; he could not put off his visit, or take her with him now.

Nor could he make use of his power over her by threatening to compel her to return; it was not in his nature to do that. The wish must come from herself, and he could help her then.

Undoubtedly the finer weapon can do the nobler work, yet, there are occasions in which rough tools can, perhaps, accomplish more. The gift of persuasion means a great deal, but the strength of force, that stands for something, too. Only such strength of compulsion, whether physical or spiritual, was not in Arlathnot's nature to make use of.

And he had no fear at all that he might not prevail at last. When she had ended he spoke long and gently to her, spoke of a woman's duty of patience and submission, of the hard, unprotected life from which she might now return, of the glory of owning a fault and making reparation for it at last. And something he spoke, too, of the higher Love from which we wilfully remove ourselves when we cast human ties away.

Meg listened with meek and downcast eyes,

and he thought that he had triumphed. The flames, slowly rising now, into which he often looked at intervals between his words, seemed to tell him many things of possible danger and suffering lying in wait for her, but of the danger and suffering that may attend a marriage proposal they said no word at all. And he had no fear that he should fail.

He had finished some very earnest words, to which she had listened with clasped hands and drooping head, when the door was half opened, and the porter once more appeared. Then he got up and went to speak to him. Meg sat still with her hands folded in her lap, and her eyes looking before her as if she were slowly turning into stone. All the while that he had been speaking to her she had been sensible of a feeling of inward conflict that she could scarcely even understand. Now for this moment she was willing to rest; the sense of exhaustion, pain, and aching limbs upon her, the firelight in front, and his help and kindness near—a

drowsy moment like that an opiate gives, she was willing to rest in it for a while.

He came back and stood by her.

"My train will be up in a minute," he said, "I must soon be going now."

"Oh, must you go?" she cried, starting as one waking from a dream.

At that instant he could only see, and she could only feel, her clinging need for him.

"I am afraid I must. It is better for you, for I want you to think seriously over all that I have said. You will think of it?"

"Yes, yes, indeed."

She looked up at him with clinging eyes, and with a face that was full of dread, like that of a child who fears that it will be left alone.

He stood by her. The last moment had come. Now, if ever, was the time to gain some definite promise from her.

"I shall be coming back this way to-morrow," he said, "and I will hope to see you then. You will give me your address?"

She took the pocket-book and pencil he held out to her and wrote it down at once. He had opened the book at random, and afterwards there dwelt in her mind the words above upon the page, "Edward Evans—poor lost soul—I must give what help I can."

"And now I must go," he said, taking it from her, and he moved towards the door.

At the threshold he paused, and held out his hand. She came hastily up to him, and, taking it, pressed it with a passionate action against her face.

"Oh, you are so good," she cried, with the tears streaming from her eyes; "I will try never to trouble you again."

In his surprise he let her hold it so for a moment, and then released it gently, with the nervous action of a man who dreads a scene, smiled at her, bent his head, and went on into the crowd.

There was a great crowd without. She struggled with that for a moment to catch sight of his face again, then, whilst she

pressed forwards, heard the whistle of the engine, and the train went on. For one instant she started convulsively, then stood still, with her hands clasped tightly on her breast, not seeing any of the people who looked at her, moaning once low to herself, as if it were her guardian angel who had gone.

What happened next she never knew. In some blind, unconscious manner she found her way back to the room where she had been, and threw herself upon her knees.

"Oh, I have been all wrong," she cried, almost aloud. "I must not trouble them again."

Slowly the time passed, hours passed even, and she waited still upon her knees, her face fixed and set, her breath coming and going as if in some mortal struggle.

"If it would do any good to them—any good to them," she kept saying to herself. Then at last words came with a burst of tears. "They do not want me, it will only bring fresh misery to me and them if I go

back to them again. A home is offered me at last; I will take that, and then I shall be lost to them, and *he* will know he need never take any trouble again for me."

* * * * *

Slowly she rose from her knees.

The fire had sunk to red embers, and there was a great deal of darkness in the room. She stumbled over something—a bit of stick upon the floor. Going to the fireplace, she let it drop upon the embers, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece and watching it while it burned. Then, when that last little flame had died out, she took up her hat from the chair on which it lay and put it on, and pinned her shawl carefully round her. A quiet, dreary feeling was in her, as if there were no more need for struggling now. She took two steps towards the door, then turned her head and looked back to the red embers of the fire. All at once—as once before in her life—she paused.

Something seemed to speak within her, to

warn her, to implore her to wait a little longer yet. She fell down upon her knees. For one instant only the struggle lasted.

"I cannot—cannot—I must do it," she cried, and rose to her feet again.

So for the second time she made her choice.

* * * * *

She went swiftly and quietly back through the gas-lit streets. Darkness was round her, but her excitement forbade the least thought of fear. It seemed only a minute before she was standing at Mrs. Gay's door. Sallie opened it with a candle in her hand, and almost started at the sight of her companion's white face and dilated eyes. "Just as she'd seen a ghost or summut," she declared in the kitchen to the rest. Then there was some talk of the lateness of her return, and Mrs. Gay, toasting cheese before the fire, announced that such ways were not respectable, and she didn't hold with them herself.

Meg had gone upstairs, stopping when she

saw the light under the door of the unlet parlour. She went in there and found Holbis alone.

He was standing very quietly by the table on which the candle was. The light on his face showed that it was haggard and sunken, with deep black hollows round his eyes, and the strong hand was clenched that rested on the table. Yet, though his breath came fast, his face was quiet as he turned his head to her.

She came and stood by him, and spoke at once.

"Mr. Holbis, I have come to tell you that I will do what you wish."

There was not a change in his silent face, or even a movement of the hand that rested on the table, though he still looked at her. She waited a moment, and then went on, faster, and in more trembling tones.

"I met this evening—a gentleman—who wanted me to go back to my friends. He is good and kind, but he does not know, as I know, how little they care for me. I would

rather separate myself from them altogether. He is coming back to-morrow. If you please, if it could be, I should like to be married to you at once."

Again, after a moment, looking at him with her blue eyes, and with a childish quiver of her lips —

"Will you care for me?"

Holbis looked down upon her beauty. There came a change in his face, like the sudden breaking of waters that have been spell-bound. His words came hoarsely.

"You don't know," he said, "how much I love you."

He held out his hand, and took both of hers into its grasp. Then he walked away to the window, and stood looking out on the street. After a while he came back and spoke with composure.

"I have been thinking often," he said, "how it should be, and what you tell me makes me certain now. Sallie is going to-morrow morning to visit my aunt at Liston. You could go with her, I would stay and

settle all my business here, and go to the inn there in the evening. In the morning we could be married, and go to London together. Would that do for you?"

Meg bent her head.

"I will care for you all my life," he said. "You—you won't deceive me now?"

"No—never."

He held out his hand and grasped hers again.

"Good-night, then."

"Good-night."

He let her hand drop, and she left the room.

Groping her way upstairs, she found her little bed, threw herself down upon it, and cried long and bitterly. But the tears came rather from exhaustion than from thought. Afterwards when, kneeling on her bed, she tried to say her prayers, that strange warning feeling seemed to touch her heart again. Too late! She had promised; his last words were in her ears; she could not deceive him now.

"And I have tried not to be selfish to them, indeed I have," she said to the darkness.

Too tired to undress, she lay down on her bed and slept.

From a heavy sleep she woke in the early morning, all trembling and confused, to see the grey light of dawn upon the stairs. Slowly the decision of the night before came back upon her mind, but she was too tired for thinking now. She set herself in order, said some broken prayers, got her things together, then found a pencil and paper, and sat down on her bed to write, with Sallie's work-box for a desk. With the words came her tears, almost blotting them out as she wrote them.

"DEAR MR. ARLATHNOT,

"You have been so kind, so kind, so very good to me, that I must write this to you. For though you may be displeased with me, I do thank you and love you with all my heart. When you read this I shall be

gone. I told you yesterday that I did not tell you all; I did not tell you that one of those here asked me to marry him. It seems to me best that I should, and give no more trouble to anyone any more. He has work in London, and he will care for me. Don't think of me again, but I am so grateful to you, and I do love you for ever.

"MEG."

She laid down her head then, crying very much; when she took up the paper it was wet through with tears. She had no envelope, so she folded it, and wrote on it, "For Mr. Arlathnot." Then she heard Sallie moving, so she put it by hastily in her pocket to give to Mrs. Gay when the last moment came.

The rest passed quickly. Sallie called her, and was surprised to see that she was dressed. They went down and had coffee by candlelight in the kitchen. Then Mrs. Gay came in, with her wisps of grey hair all unbrushed yet, and falling about her head.

At the last Holbis also appeared, and gave them the money for their journey. He was very pale, and though he spoke to Sallie, said not one word to Meg. At the door he shook hands with both, the boot-boy went on in front with their boxes in a wheelbarrow, and they went out into the cold dark streets together.

Holbis came back into the kitchen, and stood by the fire, shivering though he was not cold, with her face as he had last seen it still before his eyes. For once in his life he would probably have liked to have been left alone to dream. But Mrs. Gay came in also, shutting the door with a mysterious manner, and advancing on tiptoe to the hearth.

"Have you anything for me?" he asked, without raising his eyes when she stood still near him.

"Yes—a letter she give me."

"Give it to me."

She handed it—open.

"Have you read it?" he asked angrily, as he took it.

"In course," replied the unblushing Mrs. Gay, adding with a malicious whine, "you'll read it yourself now, won't ye?"

Holbis paid no attention to her, he was considering the name upon the back.

"Arlathnot," he said half aloud; "I don't know that."

He had heard of the Harmans through a friend of his, who was a clerk in the office of the solicitor whose name appeared in Mr. Harman's advertisement. But of this new name he had never heard, and it troubled him. After a while he turned the letter over and read it, his face darkening as he did so.

"She seems very fond o' this gentleman," Mrs. Gay observed, in a murmured and malicious whine.

"She is grateful, very grateful; that is what it is," he said, his voice softening as he spoke. "Go away now, if you please, and let me be alone."

She obeyed, and he stood for a long while leaning against the mantelpiece, and looking into the fire with a strange, quiet smile upon

his face, which gave it a radiance to which it was not used.

"She can't help loving me if we live together," he said, "there is nothing I will not do for her."

Was it a proof of what he was going to do for her that he took the letter she had written from the mantelpiece and put it into the fire, watching it slowly whilst it burnt? He went out then on his business, and did not return until the day was nearly done.

Mrs. Gay came to open the door for him in a state of subdued excitement, and led him at once to the empty parlour, where they had held many interviews before. Yes, certainly the gentleman had been.

"He did take on most fearful, sir," she said, introducing a corner of her apron into her tearful eye, "most fearful, he did. And he said it were wicked—yes, wicked were the words he said—if I knew where she were, and didn't tell it him. And he said he'd give me money too" (she did not say that she had accepted it). "And then he sit

down and write a letter, and I say, if ever I find out where she were I'd let her have it then. And I'm a widow woman, and left alone, and it's hard on me to lose" —

"You will lose nothing," interrupted Holbis, quickly and sternly. "Give me that letter."

There is no need to transcribe the letter, we can easily imagine the words that it contained. Poor Mr. Arlathnot, driven to his last resources, had made use of all the arguments he could in one last desperate attempt to save. He spoke of dangers, of harm, of God's punishment on wilfulness and rebellion, he told now at last of the home that had been so long prepared for her. And he told also of his own lonely troubled life, and of the help and comfort she might be to him, he implored her at least to consider before she cast all these things away. And then he added that even now he would always be ready, under any circumstances, to give her what help or counsel he could, for her dead father's sake—she could not know how

troubled he felt for her. "Philip Arlathnot." Holbis folded up the letter, put it into its envelope, and slipped a piece of gold into Mrs. Gay's willing fingers.

"I'll give it to you, sir," she said, with an insinuating whine, "to keep for her." He smiled grimly, and put the letter into his pocket.

Then he made his last preparations, for he was going to start at once, put a few things into a bag, and left directions with her for the rest. He preferred to go through the garden on his way to the station, and she accompanied him to the back door. As he reached it he suddenly started back as if some terror had seized him.

"That light! What is that light?" he said.

For it had shone gleaming into his eyes and on his coat. It was only the sinking sun, falling behind the poplars, and flooding the yard wall here and there with golden red. Recovering himself quickly, and ashamed of his emotion, he nodded to his companion, and strode hastily away.

The sunset *was* glorious that night. It was so fine, and the evening was so fine, that Mrs. Gay, lonely in the absence of Sallie, was tempted out into the lanes to see. Such a sunset it was as one of the painters of our own day loves to show, wide, glorious, stretching far and near round and over the flatness of the country—touching with beauty a ragged child that loitered in the lane, and filling with gleaming light and almost unearthly radiance the river, the puddles, the wet thawing snow in fields and ditches. For a few minutes—then "the sun fell, and all the land was dark."

CHAPTER II.

THERE are some hours in our lives so terrible in their distinctness that they seem to cast confusing shadows on all that follows them, standing out prominently and alone. Such are the times when some sudden calamity seizes us, or when we begin to realise peril, or when the terrible consequences of error are first in real truth able to touch our souls. For we can go on without realising for so long, if we will—only the waking must come at last. It is of such hours that we must hear now before we pause in our story for a while.

The evening was already beginning to darken over the great City, when the afternoon train passed the first house of London. Already the lamps had been lighted in the roofs of the carriages, that the passengers might read their newspapers, or prepare in comfort for their journey's end. There were very few people travelling that day. In

one carriage—the one of which we must think—there were only two, who had been now for some hours alone together, and according to all received traditions those hours should have been bright with young hopes and bridal dreams for them.

If it had been so! Meg and Holbis, married that morning, did indeed sit together and alone as the evening came, but she had pressed herself into her corner of the carriage as if she were afraid lest the smallest fold of her dress should touch her companion, and the light on her face showed it white and still with the look of a mortal conflict upon it, whilst he at the other side would not even turn his head to her, but sat with gloomy, averted face, the veins swelling in his strong hands, and the dark light of scarcely repressed passion in his eyes. The ring on her finger that he had placed there only a few short hours ago, seemed to burn her hand beneath her glove, the shriek of the train, the houses, and lights, and darkness were all phantoms hurrying past them as

they hastened on towards the end. And still, though there was burning fire in her heart, there was terror within her too, a fear that grew into haunting dread as she watched from beneath her eyelids the vein-swollen hand that she could see though she could not see his face, and she dared not break the silence, and rouse his wrath again.

What had happened then?

Holbis had arrived at Liston in the evening, and had made arrangements for his marriage at once and without difficulty. He had got for himself a licence some while before, as soon indeed as his knowledge of the Harmans' advertisement had given him a new sense of power, and the old clergyman of the little church just outside the town knew him well, and was ready to accept any excuse and plea of haste. So it was all arranged at once. He saw Meg that evening of course, and again the next morning when he joined her and his aunt before they went to the church, but he said very little at either time. Mrs. Holbis, a comfortable little

woman, round as any ball, and the retired widow of a publican, admired the black-dressed bride with childish eagerness, and in spite of mysterious hints from Sallie, was willing to impute the silence of the young couple to the best of causes, and contented herself with ordering in a pigeon pie and the best bitters. Sallie, paid beforehand, was as silent as it was in her nature to be. Meg was still and pale. There were two or three guests, all in the shop line, whom Mrs. Holbis invited for the occasion, and they all went to the church together.

Perhaps the bride found more comfort in the ceremony than she had expected. The little old churchyard and church, the silence that fell on the loud jokes and laughter of her companions when they were once inside the porch, the feeling of kneeling, praying, the tender faithfulness of the vows her trembling lips repeated—all these things came with a soothing sense, though she could not realise what was happening at all. She was much the least agitated of the two who

knelt together. Holbis did not recover himself till the names had been written, when he revived his spirits, kissed his aunt and the wife of a shopman, though *not* the bride, and seemed quietly content. Meg was satisfied with his reserve towards herself, satisfied too with his rough ordinary coat, which looked well beside the cheap finery of his companions, and willing enough to do her best to believe in him. So they all left the church, and went out into the sunlight.

It had been arranged that they should all make a little excursion together to some old ruins in the neighbourhood; the snow had melted except in the hollows, and the earth was dry.

Afterwards Meg tried hard to remember something of that morning, but she could only retain a confused memory of grey stones, pigeons fluttering above, and blue sky, a general impression of brightness and of rest. She got away from the others in the ruins, and sat down on a stone by herself, pleased with the sunshine and the soli-

tude, pleased, too, when Holbis came and sat silently down on a stone by her. They sat together for some while; he said a few words on the ruins, and she smiled timidly when she answered him. Then his companions called him, and he rose to go. As he turned away something fell from his pocket—a letter. She picked it up, meaning to call him back, and saw then that it was addressed to herself.

When Holbis came back after a while he found her sitting in the same attitude, her eyes hard and fixed, her face white, and the letter unopened in her lap. He looked down on it, and at once knew all. Their eyes met; neither of them said a word. In another instant their companions came laughing round the corner, and they both rose and joined them.

The rest of the morning passed like a terrible dream. They had the pigeon pie and bitters, and much laughter and many jokes as well. Holbis was in boisterous spirits, and the gayest of the party. Their com-

panions accompanied them to the station, and waved handkerchiefs, and gave good wishes as the train went off.

Through all those endless hours Meg had only waited for them to be left alone. She seated herself at the other end of the carriage to her companion, and as soon as the train had left the town, took out the letter and read it before his eyes.

At any other time he would have prevented her, as he had power to do. But the subduing influence of the first hours of married life was upon him, and he could only watch her as she read. She read it through, then began at the beginning and read it all through again, then put it down, and turned her face away. If he had left her alone she would have remained silent through all their journey together.

Perhaps it would have been better for him if he had submitted to this. But Holbis was in passionate trouble and terror; the longing to make excuses for himself was strong upon him, and though he feared her

anger he hated her silence more. So he spoke to her, touched her, insisted that she should speak to him. Then all at once Meg's young fury could be restrained no more, and she burst out upon him, accused him of her broken trust and wasted life, declaring passionately that she would never have married him if she had known him as he was. He endured all this in patience for a while, and then, his wrath flaming suddenly as hers had done, he commanded her to be silent. Meg had known her uncle's anger, but such as this she had never seen or even imagined before, and in terror she obeyed.

Only once during the rest of those hours did she move, that was when she took a fold of her dress that had been close to him, and drew it nearer to herself. Holbis understood well what that action meant.

More lights, more houses, more confusion and noise of people, and lighted windows, and trains rushing past them in the darkness. They were getting close to their destination now. Neither of them dared to think in the

last minutes what they should do when the train had stopped at last.

Now it had stopped. For one instant they both sat still as if they could not move. Then Holbis roused himself and stood up.

"We must be getting out here."

"I mean to go on."

He looked at her, and then went to her, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Get up at once," he said.

A sudden leaping terror shot through all Meg's pulses—poor child of seventeen—and she got out on to the platform after him.

He turned then and spoke to her again.

"Follow me; I will get a cab at once, and take you to my home."

There seemed some conscious triumph in his tone.

Meg was young enough for terror, but young enough too for the overmastering passion that in spite of terror must speak out its mind. Her words came in the very lowest whisper that could be heard.

"Stand still for one instant."

He stood still after turning round to her, and their eyes met. Her heart was beating fast; she spoke in the same low, distinct whisper still —

"I want to tell you—how much I hate you."

He did not speak, but turned his face away. But for an instant she had seen it, and had seen in it an agony in which even his anger sank as a weaker feeling, powerless and overpowered. Then he spoke, hoarsely and without turning his face to her —

"Go—go to the waiting-room. I will come back for you."

With two steps he was in the midst of the crowd, whilst she stood still, uncertain whether to rush after him or to rush away, her shaking limbs rendering both movements impossible. What should she do, where escape, left alone thus with the night coming on in the midst of London? She had no power to think; the waiting-room was close at hand, she found her way to it, and dropped down upon the sofa.

A long time seemed to pass. People came and went; she could scarcely see or hear them. She kept listening for his footstep and dreading it, and still it did not come. Then as the time still went on another cold dull fear was in her heart. What should she do if he never returned, if he had deserted her, or had gone out and—hurt himself, and she were left alone? Her heart kept beating at every sound, and yet her brain was stunned, it could offer nothing to her except the low whispered question that asked if it would not have been better for her to have died than to have come to this.

And then at last, after a long time, an endless time, she heard steps without, and saw him at the door. She got up slowly and went to him. At once she saw that some change had come in him; what it was she could not at first sight understand. He paid no attention to her, but turned away, walking heavily and unsteadily, and she followed him. At a little distance was a cab, with her box upon it, and his bag inside; he

signed to her to get in, but still as if he were moving in a dream. Then, as he gave directions in a scarcely audible voice, and stumbling into the seat that was next to her, sank into a bent and sleeping attitude at once, she began at last to understand.

If anything were needed to add to the horror she felt it must have been this conviction, joining like a fresh nightmare to the rest. She shrank away from him as far as she could—he was too much stupified to know—and sat leaning forward with her hands, one on the top of the other, pressed hard against her breast, whilst the cab rattled on through the lights and the darkness. Unfamiliar streets were here, with cheap shops and trembling, flaring lights; then all at once the cab turned into a darker road and stopped.

She got out, and her movement served to rouse her companion, who got out as well, and, gaining some sense by the action, was able to pay the man, though still in the same sort of dull and dreaming way. The door

had been opened, and she saw a woman standing with a light. She had a dim remembrance of following her companion upstairs, and that he spoke to the woman, but she knew no more than that.

Then they were alone together in a room, with an open door leading to a smaller room, and he had fallen heavily into a chair. She stood by the table, having thrown off her hat because it seemed to burn her head, looking down on him. Suddenly he moved, and raised himself, as if he would try to stand. A madness of terror seized her: she caught up her hat, and rushed downstairs, and out into the street.

What happened next she could not tell, but she knew that she was hurrying along through the lighted streets, talking out loud, and saying she would go to her friends, that they would tell her what to do—she could not bear to be so frightened, frightened—oh, she must go to them; she could hear her voice as she went. No terror was on her of the streets, the darkness, and the night-time,

it seemed quite natural to her to be hastening onwards there. And then something rumbled heavily towards her, an omnibus; she moved towards it, and it stopped. And then the man was asking her where she was going, and saying something about a "Circus," and she bent her head and got in with the rest. And then it was not a circus, but only more lights, and carriages, and people; she felt confused amongst them all. And still she hastened on, not knowing where she was going. She heard two people as she passed them talk about "Oxford Street," so she supposed she was there. And then suddenly something square and dark was by her side, the Marble Arch, under which she used to go with her nurse when she was a child.

The trees of the gardens looked dark and cool behind the railings, she liked to walk close to them. For the first time she began to feel tired; she had come a long way and wanted rest. Certainly the iron railings did not look inviting for repose—yet, if she could lean—

"Are you ill?" asked a voice by her side. A young man was standing close to her, raising his hat as he spoke.

Meg looked blankly up into his face, a very handsome face, and then cried out in her surprise —

"Oh! Mr. Langley!"

It was indeed the young artist she had known. The next instant returning consciousness made her almost regret that she had pronounced his name. For his face flushed all over with sudden delight, and his words came so fast that he could scarcely pronounce them as he spoke.

"Miss Harman! All alone here, at this time of the evening? And I never hoped to come across you again! How did you come here or into London at all? Will you not let me be of some help to you?"

And then—she hardly knew how it was—but she had taken his arm, and they were walking by the iron railings under the trees together. And he was soothing her by his kindness, though she could scarcely hear the

words he said; she felt only tired and weary, too tired and ill to think. How could she know that the boy's brain was in a whirl of excitement, and mad, trembling delight? his beautiful ideal from whom he had parted, as he thought, for all his life, was at his side, alone, deserted, unprotected; oh, surely it must be meant now that he should care for her. He did not stay to reason, it was like a dream of Heaven to him.

So they went together, and she spoke broken words about her marriage, and he told her of his mother and his sister, of his hopes, and of the rooms in which he lived. Her head was weary and confused, and though she knew at last that he had changed his tone, the words of entreaty came vaguely as though a dream: she paid no heed to them. It was only all at once that one word—he had stopped to look into her face, and had called her his darling—came piercing with the sharpness of an arrow through the rest, and she started with a convulsive movement as the full

understanding came at last to her. What! was she being *wicked* then?

They still went on together, he kept on talking. Oh! surely God knew that she had deserted her husband, and was punishing her by this degradation now. And yet her tired head could devise no means of escape, she could not speak to him, could not even move her hand from his arm; a hopeless terror was on her. At last she stood still, and looking again into her face he saw how pale she was.

"You are very tired," he said tenderly.

"There is a cab down there," whispered Meg, pointing to where it stood in the darkness.

He turned back towards it, and instantly she darted across the street and into another, where she stood still, her pulse throbbing as if fever were burning her. Oh, it was all her fault, her wickedness, she had left her husband, she must get back to her husband, by his side only lay her safety now.

All the excitement of her mind had turned now in this other direction; her husband had

become her refuge, the terror of the streets, of the night-time was upon her, her one burning fear was that God would not allow her to get back to him. She must force her way back, against all obstacles, for it seemed as if all, everything were against her to prevent it now. The dread of pursuit, too, was upon her; she went down that street, and then down another, then asked her way to Oxford Street, and began to walk with all her might.

A dream of streets, lights, many people, of a burning fever hurrying her onwards still—a long, endless time that seemed as if it would never be over, as if she could never have strength enough for all—and then it was over, and Oxford Street, and Holborn, and the people, and the lights were gone, and she stood again in the dark street before her husband's door.

A church clock struck eleven as she stood. A sleepy maidservant opened the door, and, passing her, she groped her way upstairs. There was a light beneath one door; she

opened it timidly. Yes, it was right, she had found her home again.

She came in, shut the door, and stood by the table with her hat in her hand, as if she had never left the room, and those long hours of escape had been indeed a dream. He was still sitting in the same chair, sleeping heavily, with one arm on the table. She looked at him, at the poor rooms, at the scanty furniture. Was this her home?

The little room beyond seemed dark as a hidden ambush, and some nervous feeling made her take up the lamp and go into it. But there was no one there. She caught sight of her own face in the glass as she turned back, pale, terrified, with her hair dropping on her shoulders, yet so different in its loveliness to all the rest. A sudden outburst of tears made her eyes dim.

"I might have had a very different life to this."

Then she set down the lamp upon the table, and, falling upon her knees, she cried and prayed together.

After a long while she returned to the other room again, trembling lest her husband should have moved. But he was in the same heavy stupor still. She put down the lamp, and stood at a little distance, leaning forwards and looking at him, with her hands clasped on her breast, and a curious, intent look on her face, like that of a child who is terrified and fascinated at once. That would have made a strange picture: the lonely room, the sleeping man, the one lamp on the table, and her young watching face. After a while her lips moved.

"I did promise him."

She came a little nearer, still bending forwards, and moving on tip-toe as she came. Then she stopped, but he did not move. She came closer again, and stood by him. He lay in the same heavy stupor still. She bent down to listen, but there seemed no fear that he would wake. Then, stooping all at once, she laid her cheek against the strong hand that rested on the table and kissed it. Retreating then, satisfied now, she sat down

on a chair against the wall to watch till the morning.

Slowly the hours passed. Midnight struck, hour after hour after midnight, she sat watching still. Only when the grey, light of morning at length began to dawn did she feel at last that burning, overpowering fatigue that rises over terror and anxiety, and refuses not to be satisfied. He might wake, but she could not wait for that, she must sleep now. The fire was almost out, the lamp was burning low. She extinguished it, put a few coals with her fingers upon the red embers, peeped behind the blind at the grey, pale light on the house-roofs, then went into the inner room, lay down upon the bed there, and slept.

CHAPTER III.

So passed the first night after the marriage. I said we would pause for a while—let us turn our thoughts for a moment to another sort of wedding now.

On a certain day in March the church bells rang very merrily near Mr. Harman's home. There had been grand preparations made, arches in the villages, and inscriptions, and red cloth laid down in church and churchyard, also the school children were provided with flowers, and some of the villagers even had put on their Sunday clothes for the occasion.

Within Mr. Harman's house there was great confusion; one room was given up to the breakfast, and looked already superb with the silver ornaments of the frosted cake; another was devoted to wedding presents, arranged in rows on a long table put across the end. Also, there was the

noise of footsteps on the stairs and in the passages, young voices and laughter sounded through the house, and servants went to and fro in a confusion of spirits that can scarcely be described. This was evidently a grand occasion, and deserving of the commotion that it made.

For it was Binia's wedding day.

Yes, actually and really, this was the case. Everyone had been astonished when they heard the news, the bride herself had for some time been scarcely able to believe it either. Binia! the least good-looking, the least witty, the least agreeable of the three, the one of all of them who had found the most difficulty in flirting, and had counted the most meagre list of admirers. Binia was to be married! And not only to be married, but to be married to a millionaire, and to be married the first, if you please; her sisters would have no occasion to triumph now. But how had it all happened?

Well, to say the truth, it had not all come about in such a simple and direct way as

might at first sight be supposed; there had been not a little *management*, if I may call it so, in the matter. Mr. Harman, indeed, was far from being a skilful diplomatist in such affairs as these, and if it had been to do with him his daughters would have had to trust alone to such advantages as their wealth or beauty might provide. But his married sister, Lady Carnevan, was of a very different nature, and having no children of her own was able to exercise upon "the girls," her nieces, all the ingenuity that she possessed. Binia's elevation had been due chiefly to an indiscretion of her own, a striking example of the fact that our faults sometimes may profit us. What then had this indiscretion been?

Well, we won't be hard upon young hearts, which, being human, fall naturally into errors now and then. And it must be always remembered that Mr. Harman's second daughter found more difficulty in obtaining partners than her sisters. To this cause may be imputed the fact that on the evening of one of those balls for which their new

dresses had been bought, she danced many times with a young man, the son of a Manchester tradesman, whom her sisters had been inclined to scorn. The young man was a good dancer, handsome also, and well-educated, with a natural refinement of manner, and a shy modesty that was becoming to him. The neighbourhood had "taken him up," and this being the case, and young men not being too plentiful in those parts, and Miss Binia being sometimes short of partners, she had little difficulty in persuading her father to ask him often to the house. On one occasion he stayed there even for a week.

That week brought mischief. Miss Binia's sisters had eyes and ears, and were, moreover, disposed to be critical of all attentions that were not lavished on themselves. It therefore followed that they faithfully reported to their father all that they observed. The son of the tradesman left the house when the week was over, and was not asked there again; still it was not to be supposed that

the rest of the neighbourhood would be equally careful, and occasional meetings took place. More than that, as time went on there was talk of stolen meetings in the park and elsewhere, of secret letters, and even of a ring. Lady Carnevan was sent for, and came down at once; the young tradesman was invited with deceitful sweetness to the house, from which he was immediately afterwards dismissed with contempt and scorn; the letters on both sides were given up and burnt, the ring was returned, Miss Binia went about with red eyes, and the aunt and sisters triumphed.

So far, then, so good. But Lady Carnevan was a wise woman, and the truly wise know better than to destroy a faith or love that they can make no effort to replace. Moreover, in this instance there were special reasons for alarm, Binia had been forced into ample promises, but she was nevertheless with persistence in the sulks, the young man still hovered in the neighbourhood, and difficulties might even now arise. In this

emergency Lady Carnevan at once determined what to do. If the "poor darling" could not get over her old attachment, why then the "dear child" must have some new one on which to exercise her mind.

"And the sooner the better," her aunt reflected to herself, "for this is the ugliest and crossest of 'em all, and her sisters can afford to wait."

So thinking she cast about on all sides of her a matrimonial glance.

She had not long to wait. At exactly this time there came down into the neighbourhood a gentleman of the name of Jones —a gentleman of about sixty, the owner of a beautiful country house (fresh bought from an old family) and of almost fabulous wealth besides. On this gentleman, too, did the neighbourhood look with eyes of much favour, and bestowed on him a far more persistent kindness, various mothers especially being most eager in their attentions. For in him there was no fatal failing to be found. He had, indeed, been in business himself once—

at Birmingham; he was about sixty, as I have said; he had a red face, and hair of oily black; he had a hoarse voice, a grating laugh, and most unpolished manners; he talked incessantly, but had no ideas of arts or sciences; he had a hard, commercial head, but no culture; he had splendid rings, but no taste in dress. These things might, perhaps, be considered failings by some people —people, that is, ignorant enough not to have learnt that money is birth, is rank, is education, is culture, or that if it is not all these things it is powerful enough to dispense with all. Mr. Jones became the "catch" of the neighbourhood of the Harmans. And before the winter balls were over he had been invited to Mr. Harman's house.

There is a strange freemasonry in these matters, and it is, indeed, wonderful to observe sometimes how they get themselves arranged. Mr. Jones, having furnished his great mansion after a princely fashion, wished to procure for himself a lady who

had *connections;* Lady Carnevan wished to dispose of Binia—they never spoke a word to each other on these subjects, yet it was not long before they understood. Yes, and it was not long either before the lady, of course the cleverer in such matters of the two, had given the worthy millionaire to understand that if he paid his attentions to the lovely Miss Anna, or to the sprightly Miss Kittie, his days of encouragement would indeed be short, and that he had better take what was designed for him, and be content. Mr. Jones, though old enough to be indifferent, and a little coarse-grained besides in mind and manners, was not devoid either of eyes or ears, and would have preferred to pay his homage in directions more acceptable to himself; he had his little jokes with Miss Kittie when he first came, and had been known to sit in raptures whilst the elder sister sang. Nevertheless, he was a man of much sense, and, as I have said, he did not after all greatly care, so he resigned himself without difficulty, and turned his thoughts to the

quarter where he found them most likely to meet their due reward.

And Binia?

Was it possible that she should not be flattered? Is it nothing to be addressed by a man who owns millions—who has more than one house in the country, not to speak of London, Brighton, and a shooting-box as well? Is there nothing pleasant in sitting, flushed and self-conscious, in your most becoming dress, whilst a wealthy landowner turns over photographs on the ottoman by your side, nothing agreeable in being the envy of the neighbourhood, or the first chosen of the family? It was observed by all that Binia became very serene and gracious during these days, and took much care of her appearance now. Certainly beneath all this something else was stirring in her heart—the pang of a memory still close enough to be distinct. But then!

Is it not agreed on all hands that romances give false ideas of life? And who shall say that statement is not true? For romances,

whether written for ladies or for servant girls, give to a certain feeling always the highest place. And—and in many hearts love has not the highest place at all.

Binia had given her heart, such as it was —at any rate, all the heart she had to give. What was to comfort her now? What?— why, the pleasure and satisfaction of her family, a thing that gives much comfort to a well-ordered mind, the glorious sense that everything round her was being arranged with reference to her, the still more delighted feeling that amongst the sisters she had been chosen first. Doubtless she had full knowledge of the secret springs by which this choice had been arranged. What did that signify? Before the eyes of all the world she would be the first married; her handsomer sisters would be thought slighted now. She had never thought to gain such a triumph over them; I fancy that in real earnestness she gave her thanks for that. They said he was horrid and vulgar, and that they would never have had anything to do with him. That was jealousy.

Days passed on; and more and more she began to feel that she was reaping a full reward. There had been hard times at first—hard to bear when his attentions first became more marked; harder still when the great conclusion came, and he kissed her in the conservatory, offering her a red rose with a hand as red. She had gone to her room then sometimes and cried, and thought of Frank. But now she had got quite used to him, and he was an honest though imperious sort of man, and the most lovely dresses were being made for her. Now and again, indeed, there would come into her mind a young dark face, with lips that could smile at her, and eyes into which the love-light could steal so easily; but she did not often think long of that.

Diamonds, jewels, new dresses, a trousseau, a sense of unheard-of, undreamt-of importance in the minds of others, wedding presents, the one grand prospect of a wedding-day—all these things were hers. More and more, as time went on, her one dream began to sink into a sort of luxurious melancholy

that made only more pleasant the present substantial benefits—she had been loved. And she had sacrificed herself for her family —everyone was pleased with her now.

So the great day came, and she was crowned with veil and wreath, and dressed in white shimmering satin, and saw the crowds of people who all found their greatest interest in her. And her father led her up the church, and her sisters and eight others were bridesmaids in pale pink silk, and there was a splendid wedding-breakfast, and a superb cake when all was done. And there was a crowded number of guests in the richest attire, and healths were drunk, and speeches made, and at the last all gathered round the door to see them go, and under skies as cloudless as that dream of glory they drove away.

Whether all that followed would be so pleasant— But she was to have a large establishment, and a great deal of money and splendour. These things console.

CHAPTER IV.

ON the fourth of June in that year Meg sat on one of the seats in Kensington Gardens, and read over carefully the direction that was to take her to Mr. Arlathnot's house. The day was bright and warm, even in the shady spot where she sat a few scattered sunbeams sought out flowers and trees; she had come from a distance, and it was pleasant to sit there for a while and rest. She was so much absorbed that she did not observe how often the people as they passed turned to look at her.

Perhaps she had some other reason for waiting besides fatigue, though she was very tired; she had determined resolutely what to do, but before that resolution she trembled still.

She had now been married more than four months. Already a change had taken place even in her outward appearance, a change

that can only be described at first by saying that her face looked more delicately fair, more pathetic in its childishness, even than it had done before. The rebellious expression she had worn in her uncle's house, the look of careworn desperation that had come on her by degrees at Mrs. Gay's, were gone from her features now; they had a settled and sober look that yet was childish still. She wore a dress of dark grey cotton, and beneath her black hat her eyes seemed liquid and lovely in their clearness; but the dark shade of the brim made the soft outline of her cheek look still more pale, even the small pouting lips were pale now, for with her untamed wildness her childish bloom also had fled.

Poor Meg. It was not a happy, though it was still a lovely face, that the passers-by turned round to see, observing it almost as much for the sorrow upon it as for its beauty. And yet, but for that trembling at her heart, she felt almost happy now. The pleasant quiet place, with its dim remembrances of other

times, the sunlight through the leaves and on the flowers, the people passing up and down, all these things meant rest; they seemed far removed from the dark lodgings near the City, from the dull dingy days and secret feelings, like stormy waves beneath that she had learnt to know. She had lived in these things, and yet she had never been able even to understand it, her married life.

Could it have been happy? We know that it had not begun too well. But that delirious night rested only as a memory now in the minds of both; dull, even days had succeeded and left it far behind. Holbis was kind to her, went regularly to his work, and brought her money every week; if she had wished he would have given her all that he earned. Her landlady was civil and respectful. She had enough to eat, and was no longer tormented with unceasing work; indeed, there was no more necessity for her to do any work at all. Certainly there was monotony in the long, lonely days in which she sewed or read, but she did not shrink from them,

she was more afraid of the low, abrupt words and hungry glance of the companion who came home at night.

That was the worst of it. A continued sense of danger haunted Meg, a feeling as if some evil that she could not avert were waiting close to her. This may have been only a childish fancy, or it may have grown out of her terror on that first night, but the feeling was real and distinct, and remained with her always. Sometimes it would wake her suddenly out of sleep, and she would start, the sudden movement rousing her husband too; more often it was with her through the lonely evenings whilst she waited for his footstep, dreading it, or dreading that something might have happened to him, and she should not hear it again. Through all those perplexed days these were perhaps the most distinct thoughts she had.

Then, as time went on, it must be confessed that another feeling came. Her life was wonderfully dull; as nearly as possible she spent all the day in their two rooms alone. For

Holbis was not pleased with her if he heard that she had been out in the streets, he liked her only to walk with him in the evenings, or on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, and he brought no companions home for her to see. Meg did not wish for company, but she was young enough to long for flowers, trees, and brighter scenes, to rebel inwardly against the sense of restraint, and to make resolves of getting away some day and having a day in the country in spite of him. These dreams, and her new grey cotton dress, had been her greatest pleasures during the four months that had passed.

Meanwhile, in various ways she tried to do her duty in her home; she kept the rooms neat, mended her husband's clothes, was timidly submissive to his word or look, and tried to think that she made him content with her. It was so strange still to think that she was married and that this was her life.

Was Holbis content? She had no power to know. Since that first waking from his

long, strange stupor, when he had taken her in his arms in what seemed a silent passion of penitence and affection, he had made no allusion to that dreadful night at all; he seemed to prefer to go quietly on as if such things had never been between them. If any trace of it lingered in his manner to her, it was in the fact that though she never felt out of the reach of his eyes when he was at home, he scarcely ever gave her caresses, and on those rare occasions when he would sit down by her and twist the curls of her hair round his fingers, it was less with the manner of affection than with that of one who insists on claiming to the full the privileges he has gained. He never gave her any tender words at all.

And yet she knew he loved her. Always far down in her heart she felt his love, felt it day after day, in the hungry gaze that rested always on her, or in the little presents he would bring back day after day for her—only looking in her face for thanks, and vexed always with the scrupulous kisses with which

she paid her gratitude to him. Once, lying half awake at night, she heard him weeping, but she never dared to speak to him of that. Once he burst out upon her all at once in causeless anger, and though the quarrel revived her old bitterness, she only felt in it the consciousness of his love still more.

That was on a morning in May. Holbis had risen very early, and then come back with a violent headache, and laid himself down upon the bed. Meg was brushing her hair, a little nervously because she knew he was watching her; suddenly, with a childish movement, she took it up and held it out in her hands, whilst the sunlight, coming through the window upon it, made it shine like rippling gold.

"Look," she said, "what little threads they are, and how prettily the light comes. They always used to tell me my hair was so fine."

"You only think of what is fine, and foolish, and senseless," cried Holbis, starting up. "I wouldn't be a woman to have my mind given up to such things as those. Why can't

you give up that d— nonsense, and think only of the life that is before you now! It's a poor thing for a man to have such a wife as you."

Meg had turned round to him and stood terrified, with dilated eyes and parted lips, frightened as children are by the anger they cannot understand; and then, as children do, she began to cry. Holbis endured this for a while, and then, relenting, took her in his arms, but she was trembling too much for any caresses of his to soothe, and he was obliged at last to leave her, still shaking, and with chattering teeth, and go back to his work again. That ague-fit of terror lasted on into the morning, the thought of it terrifying her almost as much when it was over as his causeless wrath had done.

For indeed, she could guess well enough from what store of deep-hidden bitterness that sudden outburst had come.

Perhaps the knowledge of this might have made her more gentle to him, but, alas! that sudden quarrel had revived her remembrances

of wrong. The strangeness of her married life had stunned those feelings for a while, but they rose again to torment her now.

When he entered the room that evening she started as if in fright; the movement was involuntary, but if she had considered, she could hardly have devised a better punishment for him.

And that gentle, shrinking manner still remained. Sometimes she would turn pale when he came near, or a sudden word of his would frighten her, or she would start at his footstep as she had done at first. Holbis took no notice of these things, only day after day he brought back his little gifts, spending more money on them now. She tried to accept them graciously, tried not to shrink when he embraced her, told herself whenever she was alone that she ought to give him her love. In vain!

Over and over again the angry outbursts of feeling would rise and sweep over all. She would not love him! He could never give her back what she had lost through him.

It was on one day when this wickedness, as she called it, or rather perhaps when this miserable struggle was strongest on her, that the idea suddenly occurred to her that she would find out Mr. Arlathnot, and ask his help. The thought came at once, like a sudden ray of light piercing the darkness, and though she dared not act upon it she clung secretly to it through succeeding weeks. If she could only write to him or see him once, she could thank him then, and he would tell her to be good.

So the slow, strange days passed. The end of May brought new troubles, trials that were not explained to her, but that she could see in her husband's restless face and sunken eyes, and that weighed on her all the more because she knew so little of them. He had never explained his work to her, but she knew that he had become sub-editor of a small newspaper, and now and then she had seen some acquaintances or friends whose appearance did not raise her opinion of a literary career. Now he began to mutter restlessly

to himself, to talk of giving everything up, of emigrating, of poverty and starvation, and she knew, without being told, that things were going wrong with him. Sometimes she longed to console, and then she thought that she could not give her help till she had learned to give her love.

And so it came to pass that she took a great resolution all at once.

Now she sat on one of the seats in the flower-walk of Kensington Gardens, and watched the sunlight and the trees, and the people passing up and down, and felt as if she had entered some new life, and the dark City days were left now far away. She had been here when she was a child. . . .

Oh, she must find Mr. Arlathnot, she would find him, it would break her heart if she did not. . . . He would tell her what to do. . . .

And still she sat in the same place, and watched the people passing, and saw the trees and flowers, like a child who has escaped out on a holiday, and is glad of

the country that it sees. This at last was rest and life again. But she must find Mr. Arlathnot now.

Poor simple creature. The discovery of his name and address, after a timid frightened search in an old brown book in the corner of a Post Office, came so like magic to her heart that it never occurred to her that there might after all be some mistake. In fact Mr. Arlathnot's great house in Kensington was the very last place where any friend ever went to look for him. It had so happened, however, that he had been there for the last few weeks, arranging it for some acquaintances who had agreed for a while to take it off his hands; Meg was more favoured than she knew. Still, even with this, how little chance there was that she would find him at home at all; he was a man of numberless occupations and friends, and his own doors were never too much troubled with his steps. She did not think of this.

No, she sat bathed in sunlight and rest trembling at the interview that was before

her, but not daring to consider that she might never have that interview at all, or staying to reflect that it might have been well to consult her husband before this last escapade was made. It was her impulse now, as usual, to go on; and this time, at least, she had no thought of harm.

After a while she got up with a long sigh, for those minutes in the flower-walk had been such rest to her. Then when she had gone a few steps she stood still again. She had walked a great deal that day, and her head was dizzy, the people and the trees began to swim before her eyes; she was obliged to find her way back to her seat, and rest again there for a while. The day was hot, no doubt she ought not to have exerted herself so much.

Getting up again after a time, she found her way wearily into Kensington. It seemed so much farther off than she had supposed.

And now she waited at last by Mr. Arlathnot's door, and rang the bell. As she did so, the handle turned from within, and he stood before her himself.

CHAPTER V.

"MEG!"

He had no time to say more, for she dropped at his feet. A boy going whistling down the street stood still to look at the tall, lank gentleman standing in the doorway, and the woman lying on the threshold before him, wondering what was meant by this. Meg was dimly conscious where she was, but had no power to rise.

Certainly Mr. Arlathnot may be forgiven for one instant of amazement. After that he had no desire at all to afford interest to his neighbours. He stooped down hastily, lifted her into the house, and closed the door. Then, turning to the footman, who stood in astonishment, he asked for the housekeeper to be sent for at once, and raised her into his arms. Meg had just sense enough left to feel the rest of this.

When she opened her eyes she was lying on a sofa; a woman, kneeling by her, was

wetting her lips with water, and Mr. Arlathnot was standing near. Weak as she felt, she tried to raise herself at once.

"Oh, where am I? What can I do?"

"Hush, hush," said Mr. Arlathnot, advancing now to her. "Don't try to speak yet. You are a little faint with walking, that is all. Get her some shawls, and pillows, Mrs. Richards, and let her rest."

His familiar voice and presence quieted her, and she laid down her head again. Then the shawls and pillows came, and were put round and under her, and a glass of wine was held to her lips, Mr. Arlathnot standing near, and directing all the time. A sense of rest and comfort was stealing over her, but her head still felt too heavy for her to speak.

"Is there anything more you would like?" Mrs. Richards asked.

"Oh, I wished to speak to—to him," cried Meg, not able in her weakness to remember the needed name. "Oh, is he here? Do only let me speak to him if he is."

"I am here," he said, coming close to her. "What do you want?"

"I—I"—but her voice was lost in sobs.

"You see," he said gently, "you are not fit to speak. Now you must be good, and quiet, and wait until you have rested more. I must go out now immediately. Will you be able to wait till I come back?"

"Yes—yes, indeed"—

"That's well. Mrs. Richards will give you all you want. I shall be back in an hour or two, I hope, and then"—his voice became insensibly graver than he knew—"then I will speak to you."

Meg raised her head a little, and a burning flush slowly dyed her cheeks. Her eyes became thoughtful; the two others waited for her to speak.

"If I could only see you alone for one instant," she said.

He signed to Mrs. Richards to leave the room, and came close to her, standing with his hands behind his back, and looking down on her with his eyes full of a grave pity.

Meg bent her head, and her fingers played with the fringes of the shawls.

"I—I"—

"Yes."

"Mr. Arlathnot, I am good."

She had raised her eyes, and he stood motionless, looking down into their blue depths, till a grave smile crept into his own.

"Are you, dear?" he said. "I am glad to hear it. But you must be good and quiet, and go to sleep now. I will come back as soon as I can, and we will see what we can do."

He stooped to arrange a shawl which had fallen on one side, and with another impulse he bent his head then, and kissed her forehead. She slipped her hand into his for a moment as she laid down her head; the small, soft touch lingered on his fingers as he left the room.

"What brings this lost lamb to me?"

Going downstairs he rejoined Mrs. Richards in the hall, and stopped by her portly, ample presence to give some further directions.

"Miss Harman is the daughter of an old dear friend of mine," he said. "You will see that she has everything she wants till I come back."

"Yes, sir; she seems in sad trouble, sir," said Mrs. Richards, smoothing her black silk skirts.

And then Mrs. Richards gave a little sniff.

"You will give her every attention, if you please," Arlathnot replied, in a rather louder voice. "I shall be back in an hour or two."

And with that he went. Mrs. Richards waited to express her opinion till the door had closed behind her master's back.

"I'd give her the attention of the street in double-quick time," she said.

But she considered it necessary to obey her master's directions in spite of that.

"Come to me?—come again—the lost lamb," reflected Arlathnot, as he went with absorbed face and careless steps through the blazing sunlight of the streets. "And why? And what does she want me now to do for

her? So she is good still, she says. Poor child. And alone here in the great city to guard herself. Oh, God help her and me—I have known so many stories. London, at least, is in no need of another victim."

Some vague sensation of coming evil, even to himself, was in his mind; he tried to shake it off in vain. Submitting to it, he spent the next hours in hurrying through various business as best he could.

And Meg meanwhile had lain on the sofa in the back drawing-room, pleased with the shawls, and pillows, and rest; her exhaustion helping the sense of dreamy luxurious comfort that seemed to enclose her now. Mrs. Richards had not returned to her—of that she was glad—but there was a little maid who brought her wine and cold chicken, and seemed much interested in her. And Mr. Arlathnot would soon be returning, and she had really seen him now.

So she lay, half sleeping, with closed eyes most of the time, thinking little of anything save the rest. Far away towards the City,

as she knew, the dingy lodgings, and Holbis, and secret burning feelings waited still for her; she must try to forget these for a time. This was her holiday, and her tired head made the rest seem so good.

Later on she slept for a little, waking with some surprise to the strange place. Then, remembering where she was, she got up and put herself in order, smoothing the fair, rough curls and coils of her hair in the mirror over the mantelpiece, and wandering then through the room that she might look at all the beautiful things that it contained. These were many, for it had once served as boudoir to the mistress of the house, and the presents of her husband, gems of pictures, ornaments, curiosities, were almost all still preserved here.

Meg paused for a long time before a picture of a mellow sunset shining into water, with the sails of a ship dark against the brightness of the sky. Then, becoming tired, she lay down and slept again more deeply now. She woke at last, refreshed,

and without surprise, and lay for a while looking at the afternoon light upon the wall, until the sound of a footstep made her heart beat once more. It was Mrs. Richards with a message. The master sent his kind love, and wished to know if she felt strong enough to see him now. Meg bent her head without replying, and the housekeeper retired again.

Then, in sudden trouble, she sat up on the sofa, her face flushed, and her heart beating, twisting her little fingers tightly round each other, and keeping her eyes fixed fast upon the door. Her agitation seemed to stop her breath, her eyes were almost blinded with looking so hard, and the throbs of her pulses came too fast for her to have any thoughts at all. All at once, as she still looked, a door behind the sofa opened, and Mr. Arlathnot came round and stood by her side.

He, also, did not enter the room without agitation, or, perhaps, only with that stirring of the heart that comes where agitation once has been. This was his wife's apartment, it was full of his gifts to her, but he always

remembered, when he came into it, that for two years he had scarcely ever been allowed to enter it. He could go where he pleased in his own house now.

He stood by her and looked down on her. In an instant, before they had either of them even seen each other, she had tried to rise from the sofa, and, partly from the weakness with which the sudden instinct was mingled, had fallen on her knees upon the ground. In much distress he stooped down to her at once, but she only clung to the hands with which he tried to raise her.

"Oh! I must seem so wicked, so ungrateful to you," cried Meg.

"No, no," he said, in as soothing tones as he could speak. "Only foolish, and hasty—we all of us are that. You know what you told me just now; I believe you with all my heart. And now you must lie down again."

He lifted her easily, for, the impulse once past, she was not strong enough to resist, and placed her upon the sofa once more.

"Put up your feet," he said. "You must

rest, you know. And now be still for a whole minute, that you may be more strong to speak."

To assist her stillness he turned away and walked down the room and back, not raising his head till he stood again by her. Then he lifted it gravely and looked at her. She had raised herself on the sofa, but had not dared to put down her feet, and was, therefore, in a half-lying, half-sitting position, with her fair, curly head raised, and her blue eyes fixed on him. Arlathnot looked on her, and, for one instant, could think of nothing else but a picture that rose fast before his mind; the room as he had seen it on the evening when he had first dared to enter it after his wife's death, with the red light of a dying sunset on the walls, and on his presents, and on the sofa a little kitten that had got in there and curled itself up amongst the shawls where his wife had lain.

No—whilst he looked, Meg's face seemed to grow stern and sad, and the lines of her lips more hard. He must think of her life, and

of the present; these visions of the past had nothing to do with her.

"Meg," he said gently, and yet with the gravity that demands an answer, "there is one thing I must ask you. On that day, after we last met, why did you not wait for me?"

"I could not help it," she said, dropping her eyes now.

"Ought you not to have waited?"

"Oh, I couldn't help it," cried Meg, raising her face, whilst the tears fell down her cheeks. "I did think over it, indeed I did. But I knew they would all hate it so much to have me go back there again; I should only bring more trouble to them all. It seemed better to find a home for myself and keep away from them."

"And do you think, then, that an unprotected child can find a home?"

"No; I am married."

"Meg—Meg"—

The sudden sharpness of his tone made Meg draw in her breath. She sat huddled

together on the sofa, with bent head and shoulders, whilst he got hastily up from his chair and walked twice up and down the room. Then, the quick movement having subdued his agitation and surprise, he sat down by her once more.

"So you are married then?" he said, smiling as his eyes met hers.

A curious, unexpected pang touched his heart notwithstanding as he spoke and looked at her—the pang, perhaps, that seizes on us all when that for which we care has been removed to other keeping than our own. But this—for which he was not prepared—was down beneath, and did not appear in his face or manner as he spoke.

Meg had smiled in answer, but the smile faded as quickly as it came. She answered sadly—

"Yes."

"And when?"

"One—two days after you met me. He had been lodging in the house; I knew he had always wished for that."

"Had you my letter?"

"Had you mine?"

There was silence. They looked at each other.

"He thought it best, I suppose," said Meg in a very low voice, "to keep back them both."

"Oh, God help you, poor child," burst from Arlathnot's lips, as he rose to his feet.

He stood still for an instant with his head turned away. Then, sitting down, with his agi tation again subdued, he turned to her.

"We will not refer to old causes for bitterness," he said gravely and gently. "You are married. That is well, for now you have someone to take care of you. And now tell me some more about your life."

So he waited in silence, now as once before, whilst she told him of herself, whilst she spoke in broken words of her husband's occupation, of their rooms near the City, of the lonely days—and then was silent for a while.

"Oh, I have been wanting to come to you

all this while," said Meg. "I thought you would tell me how to bear my life. I feel shut in, I can't help it, as if I were in prison, and would never get free at all. And it is isn't as if one could bear things better by trying—there comes a little feeling of burning, and it goes on worse from day to day. I don't see how I am ever to be good if I feel like that—and I wanted to ask you, I thought you would help me if I did."

Her words were very low, but they left despairing echoes on the air. He looked intently at her, and waited for a while.

"I cannot understand how to help you," he said, "till you tell me one thing more."

There was silence.

"Does your husband love you, Meg?"

The words came with such low, sharp distinctness that they startled her, and she replied at once.

"Oh! yes, yes. Only—so much more than I"—

"Hush! hush!" he interrupted, "there are some things no woman ought to say."

Once more he half rose, as if to walk up and down, and then checked himself. She had shrunk a little, like a child, on hearing his reproof, and bent her head; he went on speaking with the low, rapid utterances of an agitation that could not stay to spare her.

"Do you know," he said, "what makes the worst misery of married life? Do you know how many hundreds of wives in this great city might be glad to change with you?"

"He deceived me," she whispered, without raising her head, and with a burning flush upon her face.

"He cared for you."

"I might have had other care. If I had known everything I would have come to you."

Arlathnot made a little movement, and turned paler. But he was glad to see that she had spoken quite simply, without understanding that any other meaning could be put upon her words. Still her imprudence alarmed him: he spoke more severely now.

"What is the good of thinking of these things?" he said. "You must learn to help yourself. Make an effort and be strong."

"I am not strong enough for my life."

She spoke in a low, weary voice, and kept her head still bent. Arlathnot looked for an instant at the drooping, childish face, and its delicate, fragile loveliness touched him suddenly as with a pain. In that instant he determined that he would give up all attempt to force on her self-dependence, and would only try to smooth her life for her.

"Ah, well," he said, "we must all do our best. You have come to me as to a doctor, haven't you? I will give you my best advice. But you must tell me some more."

"Oh, I must be going soon," cried Meg, startled to see how low the light was on the wall, "but I will tell you all I can."

She told him of her husband's difficulties, of his wish to emigrate, and of the newspaper for which he worked, and then, at her companion's request, she wrote down her

address. After that she remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

He raised his head at last, and fixed a steady glance on her.

"Your husband doesn't know you have come here to-day?"

"No," she said, blushing and hanging down her head.

"He may, perhaps, be displeased—is it so?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Well, tell him you have come here, don't hide anything from him, you know. And don't think of coming here again. I know about your husband now, and it may be that I shall find some way of helping him. But you need not tell him that; leave everything to me. Don't be afraid; I am sure to be able in some way to see you again. And if you are in any trouble, you know my address, and any letter you write will be sent on to me. And I am very glad to have seen you."

He rose here, but Meg sat still for a minute,

clinging yet in her heart to the luxurious comfort and tenderness that surrounded her, unwilling to leave it, and go out towards her life again. After that minute, however, she rose and spoke.

"Good-bye."

He took her hand, meaning no more than that, but she raised her face to be kissed as if she had been a child.

"There is still one thing, the best thing, that I have to say to you," he said, still holding her hand, after he had touched her forehead with a grave tenderness, "Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"Trust in God."

The words went on still in Meg's ears as he accompanied her in silence to the door, and she parted from him with a little smile, and went out into the street again. Arlathnot stood and watched her as she went.

"Poor, poor child," he said to himself as he turned away. And then he went to his own room and prayed. Perhaps on the

whole there was left at first on his mind some feeling of relief and comfort; she had come to him, and he could help her now. His many occupations for others could not, as much as he wished, absorb his mind; there seemed a want of something to belong more personally to himself. And now, that warmer human feeling had at last touched his heart; she was his friend's child, and he could care for her.

He had not many more days to spend in London, but while they lasted he did all he could. Without any attempt to see her he set himself to making enquiries concerning Holbis, knowing that only through her husband would he be able to assist her now. The enquiries in some measure seemed to satisfy what he desired; he heard, indeed, no report of Holbis's literary fame, but he discovered that he was well known to many people as a strong daring man, who could set his hand to anything he would. With this information as his support his further plans were easily matured; he set himself to

them at every interval allowed him in those busy days, seeing always before his eyes as he did so the slight childish figure leaving his door and the evening sunlight on the street. Not one out of all his many schemes of charity came so close to his heart as this.

He knew that a friend of his, who for various reasons had determined not to reside in England, had bought for a speculation a large amount of uncultivated land in Australia, and was about to emigrate there, with such assistance as he could find. To this gentleman he wrote at once. The answer was delayed, and only arrived on the day of his departure, but it was satisfactory in all respects. He spent his own last half-hour in writing the one further letter that was required.

"——, Kensington,
June —th, 18—.

"DEAR MR. HOLBIS,

"You will have heard my name from your wife, and what she has told you may serve to explain in some degree why I write to

you. She is the daughter of a schoolfellow of mine, and for his sake, who was once my dearest friend, I take great interest in her.

"She has told me that for some time you have been thinking of leaving this country, and I have now to make you a proposal on behalf of a friend of mine, which may possibly prove of advantage to both."

Here followed details.

"In conclusion, I can only say that whether you accept this offer or not, I shall always be glad to be of any assistance to you, and that if you decide on leaving England, your wife will, at any rate, have one friend close at hand during the few months of your separation.

"I enclose my address, and remain

"Yours sincerely,

"PH. ABLATHNOT."

As he closed the envelope there came over him again, only with more strength now, the vague sensation of approaching evil that he had experienced once before. Doubtless he

was nervous from over-work. It was only by an effort that he could prevail upon himself to send it as he left.

A few hours later he was in his country home, and in the midst of familiar scenes had almost forgotten that he had written it at all.

CHAPTER VI.

But another, as it appeared, did not forget.

* * * * *

Mr. Arlathnot sat alone in his study three days after his arrival at his house. The windows which opened down to the ground were open, but an outside blind kept out the June sunlight; within the table was strewn with letters and accounts, with a great dish of roses in the midst. It had been his fancy for some while after his son's death that nothing bright or pleasant was now suitable to his lonely life, that his tastes had become austere and simple, and he need take no trouble to give himself pleasure now. In vain! This was only the succeeding summer, but the old look of brightness had returned to the rooms again, the clock that chimed had been set on once more in the drawing-room, and early

roses were near him in the study whilst he worked. He had a favourite bowl for these, of delicate china, round, large, shallow, in which they lay, heaped together, "compacted sweets," making company for him.

It was a lovely June afternoon. The sky was cloudless outside, the garden bright with flowers; within, the shaded room seemed to have caught the brightness of the sunlight without its heat. Arlathnot (on occasions) was fond of doing accounts and settling business papers, the work required a delicate precision that, when he was not harassed by too many employments, suited his fancy well. He was keeping holiday amongst his papers now. The room was intensely still, as indeed also was the house; no one was near at hand but the two old servants, and they were not within call either of voice or bell; still with the roses and the sunlight it was hard to feel alone. Arlathnot whistled some Italian air to himself as he bent his head over the papers, an old custom never revived till to-day, and that suited curiously

with his grey hairs and stooping figure, though indeed the dark bright glance he raised at the sound of footsteps, and even the expression of his narrow, delicate features (careworn and earthquake rent with deepest trouble though it seemed) had still about them the look of a man for whom the surface of life at least can have some pleasures yet.

There came the expected knock, and Molly entered with slow, rheumatic step, and in a deprecating manner placed a piece of torn paper on the table, observing with pitying tones that she had said "the master didn't want to be thraught."

Arlathnot took up the scrap that served as a card; two words were scrawled on it in a rough, bold hand, "John Holbis."

"Ah! I see," he said; "show him in, please, at once."

Then he pushed his papers to one side, and leaning his elbows on the table, and his face upon his hands, he waited for the visitor to come.

In another minute the passage echoed to strong footsteps, there was a knock at the door, it half-opened, and a rough giant figure could be seen without. Arlathnot rose at once.

"Come in, Mr. Holbis, if you please," he said, "I am very glad you have been able to come to me so soon." There was a quick curiosity in his mind, he would be able to see Meg's husband now.

Holbis entered as if under compulsion, with slow, unwilling steps, and stood still as close by the door as possible after he had shut it. There was something very singular in his manner. Arlathnot looked at him with wondering eyes.

"Will you not sit down?" he said.

Close by the door, against the wall, was a low easy-chair. Holbis sat down in that, whilst Arlathnot, after another instant's wonder took his former place once more. So seated, the table was between them and they were at some distance. For one minute there was silence and they looked at each other.

"I suppose," said Arlathnot, "you have come in consequence of my letter to you. I am afraid that has given you some trouble, though I am glad to be able to see you. I gave you my friend's address, I think?"

He spoke courteously, but very slowly, looking at his companion all the while, and forming conclusions more rapid than his words. Indeed the strong features of the man before him made a curious sight; black with a sullen cloud they were through which the eyes looked with vivid defiant fire. There is a kind phrase which asserts that people under certain circumstances, are "not quite themselves." Arlathnot, looking and wondering, assumed that, for some reason or other, his companion was "not quite himself" just then. There was a short silence, and then Holbis exerted himself, and spoke.

"Yes, I've written to *him*," he said, with an emphasis that gave the pronoun not the politest sound, "but it was you I wanted to see all the same. It's very kind of you to give yourself all this trouble for me."

He stopped, and his eyes wandered round the room, resting first on the delicate china bowl that held the roses, and then coming back to it again, as if he found something specially to dislike in that.

"I'm a poor man," he said, "and not used to have people trouble themselves for me. It's very kind of you, I say."

Again he waited, but Arlathnot, observing him intently, made no reply at all. He leant back in the low chair, his eyes gathering fire and defiance whilst he spoke, though, as the other saw now for the first time, his face was pale. Arlathnot found his own breath quickened with his surprise, but he felt no desire to speak.

"You're a rich gentleman, sir," said Holbis, the dark fire of his eyes concentrating themselves now on his companion's face. "You've got this fine house here, and a house in London, and rooms where you like, and everything pleasant about you where you go." (He looked at the roses here.) "I suppose you think it's a small thing for me

to give up my poor Holborn rooms, and my chairs and tables that I've had for some ten years and more, and my work and friends, and land too, that I've been born in, that I may go out into the foreign parts and leave my wife at home?"

Again silence. Arlathnot still looked with the same intense glance, but he would not be tempted into speech. It seemed as if this disconcerted his companion for a moment; there came a wavering expression on his features, and he cast down his eyes. Only for a moment; then, with the tremendous effort of one who is forcing from himself some final fatal word, he spoke again.

"My wife is very pretty—as perhaps you know."

Perhaps the wisest of us can never be fully prepared for the strength with which the rush of passion comes that succeeds even an expected insult. Arlathnot turned suddenly pale. His answer came in low tones, but was distinct enough in spite of that—

"You are very impertinent."

Four words only! but when delicately pronounced they are words that have their power.

Holbis started to his feet.

"Impertinent!" he repeated, with an outward movement of his right hand that was so clearly the effect of overmastering passion it had not the least theatrical aspect at all; "yes, I suppose every man is impertinent who meddles with such as you. You have the money and the lands, you make the laws, you think we belong to you, our wives, and souls, and all. Only you haven't everything belonging to us, whatever you may think—our hearts, our arms, and our numbers; we can do what we like with you. Do you want to hear any more? I tell you you've tried over and over again to steal her away from me; from me when every hair on her head is dearer to me than all the world beside. At the beginning you tried it then; you tempt her to your house, you think I shall go away and leave her quite to you. Don't tell me you don't care for her; there

isn't a man on earth that could look on her, and keep from loving her with all the heart he has. And she belongs to me; I've got her, and I will keep her, and if any damned villain comes between us, he shall know."

"Gently, gently, please," interrupted Arlathnot from where he sat. He spoke in soothing tones; the outpouring of Holbis's rage had given him an interval in which to restrain his own. But his words did but check the current for a moment.

"You take her to your house, you show her your pictures, and your soft carpets; you make her feel she's got nothing so good as that at home. You think she's one of you, and that though she's a poor man's wife you'll get her again at last. It shan't be, whilst there's a drop of blood left in my body. I'll stand in front of her. . . . There was a man, I knew . . . he was a gentleman, and he cast his eyes on the wife of one of us . . . but he never prospered

after; the ruin of God was on him till he died . . ."

"God do so to me and more also," said Arlathnot, "if I have in my heart a thought of harm towards either your wife or you."

He had risen, and spoke with an accent of such earnest sincerity that Holbis for a moment seemed confused.

Rallying himself, though still not with the passionate assurance with which his words had come before —

"Oh, you may talk—talk well enough," he said; "gentlemen can always find words enough to say. You've had my wife to your house; you can't deny the truth of that. Did you kiss my wife when she was there?"

He had thrown out the words with brutal bluntness, merely as the first careless insult he could find to fling, but they brought the staggering blood to his companion's forehead. Arlathnot felt that, saw the change in the face of the other, and knew at once that all hope of restraining or convincing him was gone.

With the same instant there came with a rush to his heart the cold sense of a present danger; he restrained that as he could.

"I suppose it is of no good reminding you," he said, leaning his hands on the table, and speaking earnestly and softly, "that your wife is the daughter of my earliest and dearest friend, and that I am more than old enough to feel towards her as a father. I have never cared for any woman in the way you speak of—but once—and that was for my wife. You have no right to ask for these explanations from me, and it is for your sake only that I give them to you."

He might have spoken to the idle air, for Holbis did not seem to have heard his words. For the last few minutes he had been standing shaking and trembling, with an agony of irresolution and conflict, of wretchedness and rage upon his face. Now the words came, in choked gasps, that made them scarcely sound like the tones of a human voice.

"Promise me—say that you will never see or speak to my wife again."

"By Heaven—do you think you have left yourself any right to ask such things of me?"

"Promise me," said Holbis in a slower voice, "say that you will never see or speak to my wife again. Promise that."

"No, I will not."

"Then you're a scoundrel, a damned villain, and all your friends shall know."

"You impertinent blackguard," burst out Arlathnot, "leave my house at once."

But even as he said the words they were all but checked in their speech by a quick fear that was not terror for himself.

Holbis smiled, and sat down again in the chair that he had left. The other stood in his old position, leaning forwards with his hands upon the table; his voice came now in more trembling tones.

"Tell me only one thing. Will you make her suffer for all of this?"

Holbis looked at him with a blank gaze. The stupor of overmastering rage was on

him, and he had very little power of comprehension left.

"You have this vile, mean suspicion in your heart. Are you wicked enough to punish your wife for it?"

"I—hurt Meg?" and with a sudden long sob he covered his face with his hands.

Arlathnot grasped eagerly at this moment, an unexpected resting-place that gave him time to think. He was touched too; hot as his own anger was within his heart he had something left that could feel for this misery still.

"Look here," he said, after a pause, speaking more gently than before; "I will say my last words to you. I will not make any protestations, for I know you are not now in a state to believe anything I say. Nor will I speak of the future, except that you may be sure that for her sake I will do nothing that could give you any excuse to find fault with her. That ought to be enough for you. You have come to my own house

to insult me; surely you must feel yourself that is not right. Leave my house and go."

Holbis raised his head. If he had heard the words that came before, if in any degree they had moved him, the effect of the last sentence had overpowered them all. His eyes were moist when he buried them in his hands, but they seemed now full of dry burning fire; he gave no answer in word or movement at all.

"Leave my house," said Arlathnot quietly, "and go."

"That's easily said, sir," and he folded his giant arms, stretching his legs a little, and raising his head into an attitude of defiance that by no possibility could be mistaken. His eyes had still that dark burning look; there was the defiance of madness in their glance.

"You can't make me," he said again, with a short laugh, pressing his folded arms still more.

In his whole manner there was the intense security, the confident insult of an entirely

superior strength. Arlathnot felt himself trembling with anger as he heard.

"I'll try at any rate," he said, and moved towards the bell.

But Holbis interrupted him with the same short laugh again.

"Your old servants won't hear you," he said; "they're well out of the way; I know as much as that. Will you go out in the village, sir, and call for help?"

There was silence.

Arlathnot, still trembling, stood for a moment to consider what should next be done. In spite of his anger he could not but feel himself much the weaker man; it crossed his mind also to remember how entirely to his own disadvantage in any case the report of such a conflict must be, and yet though he knew these things he hated and despised himself for his impotence none the less.

Holbis observed his hesitation, and interpreted it at once.

"Come a little nearer," he said, "if you're

not afraid of me," and a curious smile as he spoke entered into his lips and eyes.

His words had effect, though not perhaps that which he had intended.

Arlathnot waited no longer, but crossed the room at once, and laid his hand with the light touch of an easy confidence upon his companion's shoulder. There was no hesitation in his voice or manner now.

"Come," he said, "it shall all be as you will, but I'll spare you the disgrace of attacking me in my own room, at any rate. Come out into the garden with me. Oh, you need not be afraid; there will be no one near. My house is quite lonely now."

The sudden involuntary sadness of the last few words gave sufficient evidence of their sincerity; perhaps for that reason they had unexpected power.

Holbis lingered an instant, and then rose, slowly and sullenly, as if some constraint had forced him. They crossed the room together, Arlathnot's light touch on his companion's arm whilst they moved seeming to

serve as guide. They went out of the window-doors, and stood facing each other on the grass. For a minute both were motionless.

"Well!" said Arlathnot then, raising his head with a pale gleam of a smile upon his face.

But Holbis did not attempt to move.

"You're right in what you say, sir," he said after a while, as if he were replying to some remark that had been made; "I'd do myself no good by setting on to you. You'd have the law upon me, and get me in that way away from her. Only mark my words" (he raised his head, and the burning light had returned with yet greater force into his eyes) "if I find you coming between us in any way, if in any way you make it worse for me, it shall not be her that I will wish to hurt. I don't value your life at the worth of a pin's head; I tell you freely that. Only I'll wait just now and see. I wish you, sir, good-bye," and he strode away.

In some sort of blind, desperate way he

wandered through the garden, amongst the meadows, without seeing what he passed; then recovering himself, made for the station, and just caught the last train as it started for London. The night had come before he reached his home.

CHAPTER VII.

All was dark there.

He went into the inner room. A candle was burning on a chair, and Meg lay upon the bed, with her face turned towards the pillow, and a dark plaid shawl covering her from head to foot, so that he could only see some of her fair hair above. At the sound of his footsteps she started up, still half asleep, brushing away the loose bright hairs from her tired eyes, and looking like an awakened child.

"Is it you, John?" she said. "You told me you would be late, but I never thought you would be as late as this."

Holbis had experienced a revival of tenderness at the very sight of her, and this made him speak more roughly than he had meant to do.

"Get up," he said; "I've got something to say to you."

She rose at once, and sat up on the bed, with drooping head and clasped hands, the weary woman's look upon her face scarcely preventing it—so young she was!—from seeming like that of a child who has been naughty, and must now be punished. Her husband had taken so quietly what she had told him a while before, had been so quiet since, that she had expected evil.

"I've been to your fine rich friend," said Holbis. "I rather think he won't be so pleased to see you now."

He waited here, but she kept silence still.

"A long tramp it has been," he said, "down into the country, and a day's work lost beside. You're not worth all this toil you make me do for you."

"Down into the country! To my uncle's?" she cried, with a gleam of surprise that was also relief upon her face.

Perhaps he observed this, for he flung out the next words with a brutal roughness that had not been in his tone before.

"*Your uncle's!*"

There was silence. Meg sat with white face and drooping head, her lips working, her expression not childish now.

"I've seen him, and he's heard me," said Holbis with a laugh. "I guess I frightened him. He won't be so ready now to invite you to his house; you had better take care before you go after him again. He has had enough of me, I think."

"Have you hurt him?"

She spoke quite quietly; only in the increasing whiteness of her face could emotion be seen; its expression was even curiously calm.

But his next words broke down that outward quietness at once.

"What's that to you? I went down to him, and frightened him, and that's enough for this time, I should think."

"You went down to his house," cried Meg, springing to the ground with flushed cheeks and burning eyes; "you told him all your bad, wicked feelings; you hurt him and troubled him, the only man in all the world

who has a kind word for me. Am I to have nothing left? Is no one to dare ever to be kind to me? You don't know what it is to me to be shut up with you here day after day, and endure all you may say, and have no help—no pity." Her voice was lost in sobs. "And yet I would bear that, anything, rather than bring harm on him."

"You had better be careful," Holbis muttered, between his teeth, but she interrupted him with eagerness again.

"He has been like a father to me," she said. "I never believed there was so much kindness in the world till I met with him. I *will* say that it is wicked to hurt anyone I like."

"Whom you like!"

Meg looked at him with her eyes set into that still expression that makes the most terrible of defiances. She spoke in a low voice. In that moment she seemed even to want to excite him.

"Perhaps I ought to say, rather, whom I love."

Holbis only answered at first by that visible quivering of the muscles that is terrible in one whose muscles are strong. His voice also came in a whisper that suited with his darkening face.

"You'll be frightened of me directly, you know."

"You shut me up like as if we were in a coffin," cried Meg. "You think that in all the world I must never have a word of affection that does not come from you; and you deceived me at the first. I wish you would strike me; I could dislike you then."

He looked at her, a strange expression crossed his mouth, and he turned his face away.

"I won't give you that excuse," he said.

Then he moved. Meg mistook his meaning; her nerves were already strung to the highest possible tension, and could bear no more. In an agony of terror she shrank cowering back against the bed, and then, dropping on the floor, lay crouching there in a heap, hiding her face within her hands.

Holbis looked for an instant, and then turned suddenly round and strode out of the room, banging the door as he went. In the darkness of the other room he stopped, for his knees were trembling, and lay down upon the ground, where he remained lying motionless in the darkness, hearing her sobbing and crying convulsively within till half the night was over.

That sound was quieted at last. But he lay still without stirring, on his face, with his arms stretched out over the floor amongst the legs of the chairs and the table.

"Oh, God; oh, God; she can't love me," he muttered sometimes to himself.

When the morning grew bright round him he got up, and went out just as he was to his work.

Meg did not wake till the church clock struck eleven, and roused her, exhausted with her long hysterical weeping, and scarcely able for a while to remember what had happened the night before. She dressed wearily, still tired and trembling with agitation, cried

a little over her prayers, looked fearfully to see if her husband were really gone, and then, after she had set the rooms in order and tried to eat her solitary breakfast, sat down to the sewing that made her only employment during the long, solitary hours.

She felt very lonely and miserable, more wearily dejected than she had ever known herself before. The scene that must have passed the day before kept returning to her mind; she could not bear to think of it; she felt ashamed, as if her connection with her husband made her also bear a part in the reproach of that. And with this, too, came a deeper trouble; she must be cut off now entirely from one who had been a friend to her. In our loneliest hours we have some ideal of affection to which to turn. Mr. Arlathnot's kindness had become to her like the father's arms into which she could creep and be comforted for all, and she must be without it now; she felt very miserable. Only still with these things came always her husband's glance; his hungry dark eyes seemed to be

resting on her as if he were reproaching her for her thoughts of him. If he did not like it. . . She must try to love him and be good.

During the long lonely day she had almost made up her mind that when she heard his footstep she would go out to him, and tell him that she would do all he wished. Earlier in the evening than usual she heard steps upon the stairs, and she went out. He was there indeed, but he had brought four other men home with him as well. He had never brought back friends before.

Why should we dwell upon this part of our story? From that day forward Meg was in no need of company.

No, we will not dwell upon it, and yet something must be said. Poor Meg! Her lonely life, and that terrible previous night, had ill prepared her for such trial as this; her child-heart could not but turn now towards the admiration she received. Her husband's friends, always men, were constantly with her; he came back with them often in the day-time, or they would have

supper together, or go together to the theatre at night. Meg's life began to find itself amused. And yet, often and often, whilst listening to their laughter or their words, a feeling would rise in her as if she had been safer in the old times, when she spent her days alone, and was not able to be gay.

She kept that feeling of fear hid within her heart; it grew less as the days went on; a harder recklessness was coming over her, and she liked to be admired. Her husband, except to give directions, scarcely spoke to her at all.

What were his feelings? Was he, in very truth, content with all of this? Perhaps it will be better for us not to think. There is a bad cruel feeling that prompts us to crush with our own hands the plaything that has not satisfied us, but it would be a worse, a darker and more cruel feeling still that could constrain a man to take from his breast the pretty thing that had leant on his bosom, against his heart, that he might fling it in

the dust beneath his feet. Holbis knew these men, knew the admiration they gave his wife, and saw that she turned towards it too. Since she would not love him he preferred not to be able to respect her.

And Meg was young and ignorant, miserable too, and ready to turn in her loneliness towards distraction, since she could no longer hope for help. These things mean harm.

Mr. Arlathnot, when he thought of his friend's child, and of the scene through which he himself had passed, could not but have aching forebodings in his heart; yet he little imagined in what worse scene even than his ideas had anticipated they would meet again.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WORSE scene indeed! But one that also must be told.

A very hot July had already begun, when Arlathnot, much against his will, was compelled to leave his home in the country, to give up an invitation he had already accepted, and to return once more to London. A charitable society, of which he was the secretary, had experienced a great want of funds through the dishonesty of some of its officials, and he and some other gentlemen had agreed, therefore, to sacrifice their feelings so far as to spend a few July days in the metropolis, and to meet together to discuss matters there. Arlathnot had let his house, but that concerned him little; he took up his abode in some rooms he had inhabited before in Piccadilly, which he much preferred. There he set vigorously to work, not only on the ostensible cause of his return, but on other ends of business, of which the great

City can always supply enough, and soon discovered that amidst heat, and toil, and wakeful nights of listening to the carriages below, London out of the season had for him at least enough of fever left.

One pleasure, at any rate, the turmoil could supply, and he felt in some considerable need of that. A friend of his, Lord Hathurst, was about to pass through London on his way to the Continent, and had written to entreat him to spend at least a day with him. Arlathnot, pressed by many engagements, found himself reluctantly compelled to decline, but close on his refusal followed an invitation to dinner that he had no power to resist. It should all be made so pleasant for him, only a select few should be asked to come, "fellows" who could be depended upon to leave early, so that he might count upon a long evening with his friend.

For the last year he had seen very little of those with whom he had once been intimate; it was a comfort to think of meeting some of them in this informal way again.

Through a whole long hot day's work he comforted himself with the thought of this dinner at the end. Lord Hathurst had sent to him that morning a list of guests, names well-known to many besides himself. It was a compliment that they should have been asked for the purpose of meeting him.

"I think even if I were ill," said Arlathnot to himself, "I should find myself obliged to go."

He came home early for once, and rested before he dressed. Coming downstairs a little before the time, he was told that a poor woman was waiting with a message from "Mrs. Semmonses" for him.

If any other name had been attached, this message would have run the risk of being irritating to the very last degree. But Arlathnot, though he knew Mrs. Semmons but slightly, had a sincere pity for her, a lady and a widow, reduced to poverty, dying of cancer, and bearing her wretchedness with all refinement still. So he had the messenger, a poor rough nurse, with whom also he had

some acquaintance, summoned to his room at once.

It was a sad story that he heard—though only one amongst many sad stories that he knew. Mrs. Semmons had lost some of her little money, had been starving, was now suddenly worse, and her only wish left was to see her son for the last time before she died. They had been sending "all over everywhere" for him, and had come to Mr. Arlathnot at last.

"But why waste time in coming to me," asked Arlathnot, "when you must have known he was not likely to be here?"

"Oh, they had sent everywhere, indeed they had; and George Smithson, *he* had said the young man had told him this morning he was going to 'the old place at night.' And Mrs. Semmons, *she* had said Mr. Arlathnot would know. And it was not only that"—But here she paused.

"'The old place?'" repeated Arlathnot, musing. "Well, I think I can guess. I will give you the address at once"—

But she stopped him here.

"Oh, Mrs. Semmons had begged her to ask, on her bended knees, if no other way would do, that Mr. Arlathnot would go fetch her son himself—it would be no use else, she knew."

"Surely," said Arlathnot, "you cannot mean to tell me that Jack Semmons, however bad he is, would not return to see his mother now she is dying?"

"Oh, but they had sent for him before, indeed they had"—on which occasion, as it appeared, a pious fraud had been exercised, with the effect of inducing the prodigal to declare that he would never return to attend his mother's death-bed again.

She spoke with tears, for the idea of the deception had been hers.

"Very well, I quite understand," said Arlathnot. "I will write a letter for you to take to him."

"But, oh! that would be no good—indeed it would not; he would only say we had sent to you."

"But are you quite certain that she is really so ill?"

She gave him in return some of the ghastly unreserved details with which poor people reply to such a question.

"And, oh! sir," she said, clasping her hands in unfeigned grief, whilst tears rolled down her face, "the time is so short now; and he'd be drinkin' or gamblin', and wouldn't heed if a letter came, and Mrs. Semmons said if you would only go yourself" —

What was to be done? Arlathnot was not long in coming to a decision. He dismissed the woman with money and comforting words, and wrote a note at once to be taken to his friend.

"I don't ask you to forgive me," he concluded, "for I know you will not, but, at least, believe that I am disappointed."

This done and despatched, he dressed once more, and set off in a cab to "the old place."

For one reason, which he had thought best to keep to himself, he was rather glad that

he had not been obliged to write down the address he knew. For Mr. Jack Semmons (a friend once of his own son) had one day confided to him, in an outburst of confidence, that he and some other like-minded young spirits had made themselves into a society, and held "jolly meetings" at intervals at a certain house, under vows of the strictest secrecy. Arlathnot, then trying hard to gain the young man over to more sober ways, had not desired this information, and had never repeated it again, but he had remembered the address given notwithstanding.

At a little distance from the place, and after he had gone a long way, he stopped the cab, got out and walked. It was a beautiful moonlight night, the streets shone like rivers, and he had no fear of losing his way. Another turning took him into the road he wanted.

A desolate street! blank and bare in the moonlight, its houses shuttered and barred, or left open and staring with boards and notices in the windows. There were only

two lamps, and no passers-by, even the footsteps of a stray cat could be distinctly heard, and a forlorn, deserted look was upon all. Arlathnot had never been here before, the place, seen thus in the moonlight, had such a ghostly appearance that it made his heart beat quicker as he walked.

He had gone all down the street, hearing the echoes of his footsteps in the silence, and fearing he must have made some mistake, when just at the corner he found the house he sought. It was a detached house, rather large, with windows on each side of the door, and had even more than the rest a blank and gloomy look. There was not a gleam of light to be seen, and all its shutters were closed. Arlathnot crossed the narrow strip of garden, and knocked and rang several times, but without effect.

Supposing it possible that the house might really be shut up now, he left the door and came out into the street. Then he thought that he would walk round it, and see if he could find any other means of entrance; so

he turned the corner and looked. There was a small door in the wall at the side—he entered there. The yard within, with its black trees, seemed weird and lonely in the moonlight, but looking up he saw lights in the windows above. That gave him courage, and he knocked at the first door he found. An old woman opened it at once.

"Have you any people here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir; same as usual. You'll go up to them?"

"No, thanks. I don't belong here. I only want to ask if Mr. Semmons is one of them."

"I can't say, sir, I'm sure. I don't know their names, you know."

"Well, please make enquiries, at any rate, and take this card to him and say his mother is dying, and Mr. Arlathnot has come to fetch him home."

She took the card and looked at it for some while, but without moving.

"I'm sure, sir, I dursn't," she said, giving it back to him. "I dursn't for any money;

indeed it's true. They're that wild like if a body goes in among 'em. The master didn't ought to have 'em drinkin' here."

"Not for any money?" said Arlathnot smiling. "And if I go with you?"

"I might lose my place. I don't dare to, sir, indeed. And I wouldn't either, if I was you."

"Which is the way? Up here? I'll go myself."

"I wouldn't, sir" —

But he went up the stairs. They were quite dark, and he was obliged to move slowly for fear of falling. At last he came to a door, and then to a landing where a lamp hung high upon the wall. At the left hand was another door, under which a light shone, and he could hear the sound of voices. Without on the landing were two young men, one supporting the other, who seemed to have just come from the room.

"I tell you I can't stand it," said the younger and steadier of the two. "It's against the rules, and I can't stay and look

on at it besides. Certainly, though, it's the fellow's own fault, for he might have come alone. What do you say to that?"

"I—haw-w-w"—

No more articulate sound seemed possible from him.

"Gentlemen," said Arlathnot advancing, "I should be much obliged if you could tell me if Mr. Semmons is here to-night?"

They both stood and stared at him.

"I must see him at once if he is. I have come with a most urgent message that admits of no delay."

Still for a while there was silence; they seemed absorbed in astonishment at his appearance there.

"I can't tell you," said the younger then, rousing himself and speaking civilly enough. "I don't know the names of half the men that come. Perhaps Robarts"—

But Mr. Robarts was evidently so much *dis-guised* (if the expression can be excused) that it would have been no wonder if he had not known himself.

"Do you belong here?" asked the other with some curiosity of manner, but speaking with civility still.

"No."

"Ah, I thought not. I wonder now how you got here at all. Well, if I were you I wouldn't go in; they will make a tremendous row if any stranger comes. If you must, there is the door—they are all in there. I would go back with you, but I am looking after Robarts here, you see."

"I see; and thank you," said Arlathnot raising his hat.

He observed that they still looked with some surprise at him, and further, that as soon as he had turned away they at once went down the stairs. But he had no time to think of that.

He stood before the door, knocked, and receiving no answer stood still for an instant with the handle in his hand. In after life he remembered that instant as we remember the last moment that occurred before some over-

whelming shock. He turned the handle and went in.

In another moment, instantly as it seemed to him, he was standing with trembling knees, his eyes dim and bewildered, his heart beating with a rapidity that stopped his breathing with its throbs. And yet so sudden was the shock that he had no power to move, the picture before him seemed to press upon his brain, and he could only stand still to see. For that moment it seemed, indeed, as if he must be in a dream.

What was happening, then? It was a very simple sight he saw.

The room, not a large one, had several people in it, and the atmosphere was rather dim with smoke. Its one table had been pushed against the wall, and had rows of bottles and glasses upon it; the chairs were for the most part in a large circle round the walls, probably to make the space more great. About a dozen or more men were present, smoking and lounging, and leaning towards each other as they talked. Arlath-

not's first glance, wandering round them all, had seen at once that the young man he was seeking was not there. But in the same instant his eyes had fixed on an armchair that had been drawn nearly to the centre of the room, and he had caught sight of—*Meg!*

Sick and bewildered as he felt, for the first instant his mind would only occupy itself in endeavouring to remember what painting it was that he had seen of which this scene reminded him. She was in the midst of all, as has been said; the attention of all was on her, the only woman in the room. She wore a white muslin dress fitting closely round her throat, her bright, gleaming hair alone made colour above. Her lovely child-face was pale, and had the strangest expression, terrified and yet fascinated, as if some spell were on her, and forcing her to keep her place. Before her, on a low stool, with his face resting on his hands, sat a young man, gazing up with a hard, intent glance; by her side another sat on a high seat with his arm across the top of her chair, so that it almost

touched her head. Arlathnot looked, and as his slow comprehension began to realize the scene his heart beat fast with an indignation that can scarcely be expressed.

No one observed him, and for his own part he could not move. He saw the man in front of her say something in a low voice, and with a smile, probably a compliment, and in the same frightened way she bent her head to hear. The man at the side of her moved a little as she did, and as she put her head back it rested against his arm. Then with a sudden start and a subdued exclamation she half-rose from her seat, and then crimson with terror at her own movement, as it seemed, sank down again once more. She was very pale now, and looking closer he could see that her shoulders were trembling convulsively beneath her dress. That broke the spell; in another instant he was half across the room.

"Meg!"

The word broke unwares and sharply from his lips. All started and turned their heads

to him. Then for the first time he became aware of Holbis, sitting apart from the others with a resolute and gloomy brow. That sight an instant before would have saved him his exclamation, but it was too late now for repentance. Meg had started with a cry to her feet; in another moment she was clinging to his arm.

"Oh, Mr. Arlathnot, save me! Take me away, take me away from here!"

Her wailing, sobbing voice made the only sound in the room—there was silence all round.

"I don't like it. I can't bear it; it frightens me," cried Meg with the wailing of a child. "Oh, don't go away. Take me with you. Don't let me stay with all these people here."

Arlathnot felt, rather than knew, that others in the room had risen to their feet. Angry faces were pressing round him; he had only sight of the one who had not moved at all.

"Mr. Holbis," he said, "let me entreat you to take your wife away."

There was a little silence.

"I rather think it was she who entreated you," said Holbis then, with a bitter sneer, putting out his legs, and leaning back his head as if to rest it as he spoke.

"Oh, don't go away. Take me with you to my home," cried Meg in too convulsive terror to understand the words she said. "I want someone to be with me, indeed I do. Oh, do take me quite away from here."

She was clinging to his arm with a grasp that he could scarcely have released.

"Mr. Holbis," said Arlathnot again, with the sense of a desperate appeal in his manner and in his voice, "you must feel yourself this is not fit company for your wife. Let me entreat you" — but a rising murmur, like a growl round him, compelled him to desist.

It rose and swelled, that murmur; he could distinguish words here and there — "Liar,"

"hypocrite," "canting, grey-headed sneak," but he was too excited to attend.

"Let me implore—" he began again, but the tumult had now become too great for him to speak.

"Stop that," said Holbis, rising, and with one movement of his hand subduing for the moment the rising storm at once. "And let me tell you first all that I've got to say. Mr. Arlathnot, I'm more obliged to you than I can tell for coming here to take my wife. Pray take her, I am sure I have no wish to hinder that. Only when you next meet me or anyone of us you had better look to yourself, for it will be worse for you. That's about enough, I think."

For an instant there was complete silence. Then Arlathnot, looking round with despairing eyes, saw that there was a movement of those behind him towards the door, as if to bar the way. That decided him, and he turned and spoke once more to Holbis, whilst she still clung to him.

"Since you are not man enough," he said

in ringing tones, "to know how to protect your wife, since you can be so entirely unmoved by her distress, you compel me to take your place and do your work for you. I will take your wife down stairs. When I know that she is safe I will come back and tell you what brought me here to-night."

"You'd better not," said Holbis below his breath, leaning still against the wall.

"I will come back," Arlathnot repeated in firm, decided tones. "Move out of the way, if you please," and with her still clinging to him he turned towards the door.

For one instant of miserable, strained expectation he expected a tumult to arise, but Holbis's passive attitude, or her slight clinging figure, or the look of white determination on his own face prevailed instead, and they passed out without even the hindrance of a word. Outside a black shawl was lying on a chair; he stopped to wrap it round her, and then, putting his arm round her, for without that support she must have fallen, he took her down the stairs. All the way he was

listening with every faculty strained into attention to catch the sounds above. But, though he thought he could hear movements and voices at last, there was no sudden opening of the door, no rush downwards upon them. They reached the dark hall in silence, and were close now to the safety of the street.

Then he turned to her. Until that moment his whole soul had been absorbed in considering how best to effect her deliverance; with the leisure from terror rushed back his anger now. He stood still in the dark hall to speak.

"What do you mean by this?" he said. "How could you think of coming to such a place as this? Have you no shame left, no modesty, or self-respect? I begin to see now at last that I ought to despair for you."

"My husband brought me," whispered and faltered Meg.

"Your husband!" he echoed with contempt and scorn. "Do you suppose for an instant that he would have brought you if you had not agreed to come? I am ashamed

of you, ashamed even to be near you when I think that you can come willingly to such a scene as this."

"Oh, I do want—Oh, do only tell me to be good."

"Tell you! What is the use of my telling you? You ought to know yourself. I can only think of getting you safely to your home. Come out into the street."

It was strange to see the beautiful dim light of the waning moon outside. They stood still upon the steps. In the distance a cab was coming slowly down the street.

"That will do for you," he said.

"Oh, don't go away and leave me. I am so afraid. Oh, do tell me how I can be good."

"If you would cling to Christ instead of clinging to me there might be some hope for you," he said.

By the moonlight he could see her tearful, miserable eyes as she looked at him. Her hand was on his arm, she drew it further through that she might clasp her fingers on

her breast like a child about to say its prayers.

"If you will tell me what to do, I will try to do it," she said.

He had only an instant in which to speak.

"Never come to such a place as this again."

"Yes . . . My husband" . . . .

"Entreat—implore your husband to keep you away from such men as these. Do your husband's friends ever come to his house when he is away?"

"Yes . . . just lately . . . with messages and things."

"Never receive them then. Get some woman of the house, if you can, always to stay with you. Will you do all this?"

"Yes . . . I will try indeed" . . . .

"And pray to the Lord, Meg."

"I will try . . . indeed" . . . .

The cab drew near. He turned round then and took both her hands.

"God bless and help you, you poor child," he said.

With an innocent movement she raised her face, which was all wet with tears, and, afraid of hurting her, he stooped and kissed it. She seemed so slight and young, the sense of protecting tenderness beat so strongly in his heart that he longed to take her as into a father's arms, but he restrained himself from that. He called the cab, and gave the direction to the driver, he helped her down the steps, through the garden, and put her into it. It drove away.

Sick and stunned in feeling he leant back against the railings in the moonlight, listening to the distant retreating wheels, with a relief that overwhelmed his mind at first. For the last minutes he had given every thought to her, she was safe now, and with what sense he had left he must consider for himself.

Should he go back to them or not?

For the first instant as that question crossed his mind it seemed to present itself in the light of an absurdity to which no answer was required. What possible object of any sort would be gained by going back?

He would exasperate Holbis to still further rage, he would put himself in considerable danger, and only on his own part exhibit a recklessness of courage that no one of them had any reason to expect. His promise pressed upon his mind, but surely—surely that could not be demanded of him now. Then he remembered that he had been last seen by them going out alone into the night with her.

That decided him, and without considering further he went in and up the stairs. For one moment he paused and listened to the sound of voices within, with a curious trembling thrill at his heart—that almost pleasant feeling natural to one who without being incapable of a brave action has still been born with nerves.

For one moment—he opened the door and went in.

Some stronger agitation than he knew of must have been on him, for he found himself almost blind as he advanced into the room, and could see none of the faces that were there. The first thing that struck him was

the silence all round; they had been talking before, but no one seemed even stirring now. Then he became aware of Holbis, standing still against the wall, his eyes gleaming with wild delight and triumph, and then he knew that three men had moved silently to guard the door. He stood still and looked round. There was no noise, there was no surface-excitement on the faces that were round him on every side, but as he looked on those silent features all turned to him, he knew at once that he was before his judges, and judges in whom no mercy would be found.

Meg's arm-chair was still in the centre of the room, he moved to it, and stood leaning his arms on the top and looking at the rest. He did not speak a word, and no one seemed to expect he would. The windows were barred, two men stood before the door, he had no weapon in his hand. These thoughts crossed his mind rapidly, with another—which was not praying—that suggested he was in some need of prayer. And then, like an after-throb, came the reflection that what-

ever the scene was it would probably not last for long. Only he turned his mind and thoughts away from the sickening triumph that one pair of eyes was holding over him.

"You know what we promised each other," was all that Holbis said.

The rest heard. Arlathnot knew that they were pressing round him now. It occurred to him as he looked on all these men's faces that he ought to speak to them, to ask them to give him a hearing, at least, before they struck. He opened his lips, there came a tumult in answer, but he could not hear what words were said. Instinctively he put up his hand to make a gesture of silence, and then they all seemed to fall on him together.

What happened next he did not know, he had some dim idea of putting out his arms, and then of being struck down to the ground at once. Then, as he lay in darkness, stunned and blinded by his fall, he was roused by the heel of a man's boot crushing in his lips and teeth. He tried then to rise, but in vain; heavy knees were pressing on his breast, and

he could be sensible of nothing but darkness and the crushing blows that he thought must break the arms he put up to guard his head.

For a while—and then suddenly, as in a dream, it all was changed. There had been a low sound like a growl, and then his tormentors were pulled off him to right and left, and he was dragged by main force to his feet. He was still too stunned to see, but at the sound of the first word he knew at once who his preserver was.

"I can't help it," said the deep choked tones. "I can't stand by and see it, only one against you all. Confound you, you have given him enough for once, you had better keep off him now."

* * * * *

They were together in a dark and narrow street, the light of one lamp was shining upon them both. Arlathnot knew this, though how they had got there he scarcely knew at all. They were sitting on the steps of a

house. He raised his head, swimming still with pain and faintness, and saw that the dark glance of his companion was fixed on him. That roused him, and he tried to sit up but found himself in almost too much pain to move.

"Well—you are better, it seems," said Holbis, in grim and sullen tones. "Not quite such a dead-weight now upon this arm of mine. I don't know why I have taken all these pains to save your precious life for you —and yet, perhaps, I do; I know at least the end of it ought not to come from any other hand but mine."

Perhaps there is no condition of consciousness, however slight, that a threat of sudden death will not serve to rouse. Arlathnot, half-stunned with pain as he was, raised himself at once. He found then that it was difficult to speak because his mouth was full of blood. The dark street, his own shattered condition, his companion's face—it was all a nightmare from which he could not wake.

"I've saved your life," said Holbis, "and

I've brought you here, and you're alone with me. I can make you promise now."

The nightmare grew darker and heavier round him, he knew no more than that. And still through it all he could hear his companion's voice.

"I've got that within my hand," said Holbis, "that could settle ten such men as you. It's not loaded, but I've no need for that. Promise me on your life—say you will never see or speak to my wife again."

Arlathnot, roused by the words from his sense of dreaming, sat up and looked at him. Their eyes met—but he could only think that the street was lonely, and that it must be very late at night. And then, by sudden instinct, he knew that in his companion's glance there was murder, that he was helpless, and that they were alone.

"Promise me," said Holbis, moving his hand so that the barrel of the old and heavy pistol could be seen. "Swear on your life that you will not see or speak to my wife again."

Arlathnot looked at him, and there was silence.

"You have only a minute. Will you promise that or not?"

"No, I will not."

Holbis started, and clenched the strong muscles of his hand over the weapon it contained. His voice came in a low, hissing whisper —

"You have only a moment longer. It is for your life."

"You seem to think I am very fond of my life," murmured Arlathnot with difficulty, for his crushed, bleeding lips made it hard for him to speak. "If I had feared death as much as you suppose I need not have come back amongst you all just now."

"You think I do not mean it. You think I am afraid to kill you, now this instant," and with a last desperate look he raised the weapon that he held. Arlathnot leant his head wearily back against the pillar by the steps.

"I only know one thing," he whispered

with all the strength he had. "Beat out my brains if you like, you will beat no promise out of me."

And having with difficulty pronounced these words he lay quietly back expecting for the blow to come. Holbis looked at him, looked again, and then with a sudden movement flung the pistol on the ground, and threw himself on his knees by his companion's side.

"You have pluck," he said. "Shake hands. You are a braver man than me."

At that instant his whole heart and mind seemed absorbed in a sudden astonishment at the courage of this weaker man. Arlathnot sat up again, roused by the change to a fuller consciousness than he had yet possessed.

"Thank you," he said, folding his arms, and with a look that his wife had known very well. "I think there is no need for that." Perhaps it was hardly a Christian feeling that inspired his words, but in that moment the pain and shame of his struggle were upon him, and he could not pardon the man through

whom the blows had come. Holbis still knelt, staring blankly, knowing himself repulsed, perhaps he felt for the first time that the delicate gentleman was more than a match for him.

And that feeling brought another too, there came the look of a revulsion into misery upon his face.

"Oh, Meg, Meg," he cried, and threw himself upon the ground.

He lay there, writhing in a heap, upon his face. Arlathnot sat on the steps above, clasping his knees, and looking down on him. A great pity rose within his heart. He covered his face with his hands and prayed.

It seemed after a long while that at last he removed his fingers, but the lamp was still shining, and his companion was lying on the ground in front of him. He bent forwards and touched his shoulder.

"Look here," he said, and Holbis raised himself to hear. "Look here, if you will promise one thing, I will promise on my part never to see your wife again."

Holbis started with a sudden exclamation to his feet. Arlathnot looked steadily at him.

"Promise that you will take care of her . . . that you will keep her from such company . . . that you will never take her again to such a place as that. And I"—he stopped, for his companion's gasping excitement was almost terrible to see—"and I will promise, as you do, never to see or speak to her again. There is my hand on that."

He was scarcely prepared for the fierce grasp with which his hand was seized. Even whilst it was still held however he remembered to say something more.

"There is one thing though," he whispered, in more faltering tones.

Holbis, who had knelt down, rose to his feet and looked down on him with a darkening brow.

"If I meet her accidentally I cannot be as if I did not know her, I cannot pass her without a look or word at all. But I will never meet her if I can help it. And I must

write now, for the last time, to her, and tell her to expect no more help from me."

A low muttered oath broke from the lips of the man who was standing.

Arlathnot went on unheeding.

"I will write now under your eyes, you shall read it all. Let us make haste or some policeman may be coming round. Do you agree to this?"

Holbis gave in reply an inarticulate sound, but no word of answer at all.

"And—you will give this to her?"

His tone and glance were more searching than he knew, his companion turned uneasily away.

"Yes, yes, she shall have it," he muttered quickly, "only write at once."

It seemed to Arlathnot that he was eager for him to write in order that he might see what words he said.

For himself he knew that only excitement and some fear of his companion kept him from fainting again. He felt for his pocket-book with difficulty, for his stiffened arms

would scarcely move, and put it on his knee to write, whilst Holbis stood watchful near. Even now he had to tell himself that he was not dreaming; it was so strange to be in the street in the midst of the night, covered with dust and blood, with this companion by his side.

He collected his senses as well as he could, and wrote —

"Dear Meg,

The moment he had put down these words he regretted them, but, under Holbis's watching eyes, he could erase nothing. He went on, after a pause, his delicate, small handwriting scarcely trembling even now.

"Your husband will tell you that this is the last letter I shall write to you. I write this once more to entreat you, for the sake of your dead mother, of God, of the Saviour who died for you, to be more careful of yourself. Believe me, a woman cannot take too much care, no treasure on earth can

replace to her the smallest injury to the modesty of her womanhood.

"I have promised, under conditions, not to see or write to you again. And, perhaps, in some things, that is for the best. But I want you to believe, notwithstanding, that no amount of years or absence can make the smallest difference in the interest I must always feel in the child of my friend. One last word I should like to add for you. Try to be happy; our happiness lies more in our own hands than we can easily believe. When your life is bright do not forget to give thanks to God; and if, at any time, it should seem to you hard and sad, remember that the life of the Son of God was harder and sadder still.

"Your father's friend,

"PHILIP ARLATHNOT."

"You can read it," he said, as he tore out the leaf, folded it, and handed it to Holbis who still stood watching near.

"I intend to do so," he replied.

Then he walked away a few steps, and then came back. Arlathnot was crouching on the steps, doubled together with weariness and pain. Already the night, though still dark, was beginning to have the look that comes before the dawn.

"What will you do?" he said, and Arlathnot raised his pallid face to look at him.

"I am only resting for a while," he replied faintly. "Then I will find some means to get to my rooms. You need not think of me."

Holbis said no more, but walked away. When he was in the next street he stood still under a lamp, and, opening the carefully folded paper that he held, he read it slowly through. The end of the last sentence seemed to strike him, for he read it several times. It still kept repeating itself in his head as he wandered on once more through the streets.

All through the rest of the night he wandered in this aimless way, walking over many miles, but not seeking to rest, or to

find an end of them for himself at all. At break of day he stood on one of the bridges over the river, and looking down saw the smoky mists and the yellow light in the water. The spot must have had some fascination for him, haggard though his face was, for he could not leave it.

How they all repeated themselves, the poor girl struck down by him upon a bridge like this, the haunting sense of doom under which he always lived, the hungry, craving feelings that for so many months had been gnawing and tearing at his heart! What could be the end of all these things for him? And still, as he stood looking out over the water, the words kept repeating themselves over and over again in his mind. "Harder and sadder still—harder still," they said. The idea had grasped him, for one instant his heathen nature stood appalled in its ignorant fierceness at this new idea of a human suffering that could have been greater than his own.

For one instant, and then with the blind,

savage movement of a man who will do anything rather than believe, he dashed his hand upon the bridge.

"It can't be. *He* never cared for any woman as I care for Meg."

* * * * *

And meanwhile Arlathnot had found the rest of the night much like a delirious dream, that we can scarcely remember afterwards, though we found it distinctly painful at the time. He had a dim remembrance of going from one street to another, of falling down once, of being addressed some time afterwards by a policeman, and of trying all the while to understand what could possibly have occurred to him. At last, as the dawn grew bright, he was able to secure a cab, and, in the greater rest of being driven, found his consciousness return once more. The sunrise was red between the streets, and he remembered that he had scarcely hoped to see the morning light again.

With that came thanksgivings—he was glad

not to have died in such a delirious scene; at least, he had been spared from that. And, roused still more, he began to consider, for the first time, what sort of damage had been done to him. That was soon discovered. He was very much bruised, especially about the head and arms; his mouth was cut and torn, and two of his front teeth were broken off. That last discovery, never made till now, roused him at once to a sense of very sharp concern. For a man past forty may be excused some vanity in possessing perfect teeth.

He began now to ask to what misdeeds of his own this punishment was due. And, going carefully over the events of the night, he decided that his own most reckless imprudence was the cause of all.

"If any one of my country friends had come up to my wife, as she sat by my side at the Opera, (how I used to hate the place!) and insisted on taking her away, I should have thought him a low cad whom I would like to thrash at the first opportunity: I have no right to complain now because others

do to me what I should have done to them. I suppose some sort of story will be half over London in a week—my servants alone would be quite enough for that. Well! I can call myself one of the knights of old, an old knight, indeed. And, yet, not quite the same, for they lost their heads sometimes, and their hearts always, but never their front teeth"—he was so tired that the words made themselves into a refrain to the rattling of the cab—"for they lost their heads sometimes, and their hearts always, but never their front teeth."

So, between sleeping, and waking, and delirious dreams, in which fantastic images mingled themselves with the experiences of the night, a great part of the morning wore away. He roused himself at last, after long unconsciousness, to find that he had given the wrong address, and was now some miles in the opposite direction. The mistake took some time to remedy, it was late in the morning, and all Piccadilly had been long astir before he reached his rooms.

Trembling and shivering, and only longing to hide himself from view with all convenient speed, he found his way to the door of the house. But, even as he entered, another door opened near, and there came out a little dark lady, brilliant in gold ornaments and many-tinted silk, who stood still for an instant in amazement, and then sprang towards him.

"*Philip!*"

It was, indeed, the wife of his half-brother, Lady Clinton; and he remembered now that she and her husband were to arrive the night before. He had no welcome ready, as he stood dumb before her, he could have cried with vexation at being seen by her in such a plight.

"My goodness, Philip, what can you have been doing with yourself?"

"Only a night's amusement," said Arlathnot, trying to force himself to smile. "Here, let me go on, I must get myself respectable before I can speak to you. Where is George?"

"Gone out for the day. Have you hurt yourself, Philip?"

"Not to speak of. I will come to you as soon as I am ready."

And he passed her and went upstairs. I think he did cry as soon as he found himself alone.

However, it could not be helped, and the necessary explanations, that were so terrible to think of, had best be made at once. An hour later, a little more respectable as regarded his outward appearance, but pale, battered, and disfigured still, he found his way downstairs to Lady Clinton's room. For she had sent him her love, with a desire to speak to him at once, and, though he felt very ill, it was not possible to him to be alone.

So now they sat on each side of the fireplace, Lady Clinton in her fluttering, rustling silk, her face watchful and lively as a bird's; Arlathnot with his head upon his hand, and his eyes upon the ground. She let him be in silence for a while, which was rather wonderful for her.

"Philip, tell me only one thing," she

whispered softly and wistfully at last, and, raising his face, he saw that her small, brilliant black eyes were fixed on him. She went on more softly and wistfully still. "Have you—have you been fighting in a public-house?"

"Not exactly that," he said, smiling at her eyes, "and yet more like it than you perhaps suppose."

"I won't ask you," she said, after a pause, and with a manner decidedly *méchant*, "since you so evidently do not want to tell."

"There is not much to say," he said, rousing himself with a terrible effort to get over it all at once. "I believe I have been a fool, but there is no use in thinking of that now. The fact is I went to some rather out-of-the-way quarters to look up a young man whose mother was ill, and they did not quite understand my intentions, or I did not make my intentions clear, and I got knocked down, and otherwise knocked about, and that is all."

"And—but—the young man? I can't quite understand"—

"He was not there. Perhaps I ought to say that I found instead a"—

"A young woman? Oh, Philip, *really* now"—

"I tell you," said Arlathnot, becoming angry, "that there is no joke of any sort to be made from this. The poor girl appealed to me to protect her, I had no resource but to do the best I could."

"You poor dear creature. And did you gain a great many wounds in this—young woman's—cause?"

"Not to speak of. My lips and teeth seem to have suffered most."

"You poor thing. And what a very pretty story this will be for all your friends to know!"

"I trust to you, Lilie," said Arlathnot, raising himself up and speaking with great seriousness now, "to say no word upon the matter. You may suppose that I do not wish it known."

"Perhaps that will be best," she replied, with great demureness, and said nothing

further for a while, but sat meditating, shaking out changing colours from her dress with every little movement that she made. Arlathnot waited again with his head upon his hand, knowing certainly that something more would come.

"If I might ask you one thing more," she whispered, with little fluttering breaths, at last.

"Only not too much, if you could be so kind; my head aches almost too much for me to speak."

"Poor dear! But it is a very serious question, though you do not think it is. Philip, I am getting into years myself, and so I dare to say it. Do you not think you may be a little, little old for Don Quixote scenes like this?"

"I deserve the character at any rate," he said, "for I earn the Don's reward."

"I am wondering," she added pensively playing with her watch chain, "how one ought to call that sort of people now."

"I believe they generally call them fools," he said.

"But I really couldn't be quite so hard on you as that. Oh, Philip, don't look like that, you know I only mean to tease. You have been doing something fine and good, I know you have. Ever since the day I first saw you I have thought you an angel on earth—yes, indeed I have."

"There are few things more irritating," said Arlathnot, "than an entirely meaningless compliment."

"Then I won't compliment you again, you may be sure of that," she answered with a pout. "You don't really appear at all like what I said, much more like some battered sinner paying the penalty of his crimes. And yet the saints one reads of used to be knocked down sometimes, I think?"

"Only they never lost their front teeth," was all that Arlathnot replied.

CHAPTER IX.

LET us have a breath of country air again.

It must surely have been some very important reason that made Miss Anna Harman get up before breakfast to take a walk outside the house. For Miss Harman was not fond of losing any hours of sleep, or rather she liked to lose them in lighted rooms, where indeed she lost so many that it was often a great effort for her to be down in time in the morning, and take her place at the head of the table as lady of the house. *This* morning she was down very much before the time, and, more wonderful still, she had even lain awake for an hour before she rose.

Before the side-door that led into the garden she paused for a moment, and drew her light, many-coloured shawl more closely round her, then went out, a tall, erect figure, into the morning dews. Her garden hat was hanging on her arm, leaving

bare to the morning breezes her crown of black, beautiful hair; there was a slight, unwonted flush on her face, but her grey eyes were bright and clear, and her tall figure had its usual erect and stately grace. Why not, when she was only going out into the garden to see the sunlight?

And indeed the early day was a pleasant sight on that morning in July. There had been such heavy dews that the sun had not even yet been able to raise them, and they rested like a silver veil on grass and flowers. Then the morning air was fresh and sweet, the birds were singing their very loudest, and great pale roses rested against the red walls of the house. No doubt Miss Anna Harman felt these things, for there was a slight faint smile upon her lips as she turned, walking slowly, down one of the dark garden paths. Her smile was now more free and undisturbed than it once had been, for the last year her manner had been more serene and gracious, her life had appeared more happy—the influence she had dreaded

had chosen to remove itself—she had no thought of possible rivalry to disturb her now.

Down the dark garden-path she went, staying now and then to look at flower or bird, a little unwilling, perhaps even nervously unwilling, to proceed too fast. All at once she stopped—at the corner of the dark garden-path, with its head turned away from her, another figure seemed to be watching too.

Why should she stop and seem surprised at that? It was only the night before that, happening to observe carelessly that she felt inclined to get up early on one of these glorious mornings and walk in the garden before breakfast time, she had almost started to see how intently and eagerly two eyes were fixed on her. After that she debated within herself whether she ought to keep her word, and yet I think that but for that circumstance she would never have thought of keeping it at all.

Why should we on our part be silent and

reserved? For some months, ever since the evening of Binia's wedding-day, there had been a certain feeling of concealed and growing excitement in the house. For not far from Mr. Harman's establishment was a large, splendid park of several miles in length, was a great rambling old delicious house, with carved fireplaces, and beams across the ceilings, and immense oak rooms, and windows in whose great depths of carved stone you could sit as if they were retiring-rooms themselves, and see beneath you the winding river and the deer in the park below. It was a splendid place. What wonder if friends and relations looked with special interest on one whose lot they now hoped it might be to be mistress there? Certainly, though, the young people had not been behaving well. Ever since that one evening, aware, perhaps, that they had been observed, they had fallen into the strangest and most cold reserve, scarcely speaking to, or looking at, or coming near each other; it was only by marvels of intuition that their mutual affection could be

supposed at all. Anna Harman, going out alone into the garden on this summer morning, had felt all the time as if the consummation of something long delayed must be close to her at last.

So they stood together amongst the dark yew trees and the flowers, the tall, beautiful girl, and the taller, strong young man, and—

"What! you are here!" she said, and then they seemed surprised; and then they spoke a little of their own great virtue in getting up so soon, and of all the beauty and freshness that those who lay in bed had lost, and then they went a little further, and said a word or two on the flowers, and she showed to him the distant stream lying like a flash of light in a vista between the trees; and then he must see the view from the terrace, he had heard so much of that, and he might be going away that day. His voice softened as he said the last few words, she knew that his dark eyes were on her, and she dared not look at him.

So they found their way to the terrace, and

sat down there upon a seat, and saw the distant country, and the stream shining in the morning sunlight far below. They said not a word; she kept her eyes on the distant prospect, and was quiet, though her heart was beating fast. After a while she dared to turn her head a little—he was looking at her. Their eyes met, there seemed no need for speech; and then all at once, in an instant, she was in his arms, he had clasped her to his heart, and she was weeping in his close embrace those delicious tears that can be only known by a proud nature that has yielded itself up without reserve at last.

"O zarte Sehnsucht"—life can have pleasure.

CHAPTER X.

On a dull dark September evening Meg was walking up and down her room, her hands loosely clasped and falling listlessly, her steps slow, even, wearied, as if their regularity of movement could bring some rest to her. Something of the same expression was in the face she turned to listen to the wind against the window, quiet, rested by her movement, ready to hear the wind and to be soothed, and yet too dulled and wearied to be pleased. The pleasure of life indeed found no expression there.

And yet, after all, there was something pleasant in the rest; all the afternoon she had sat by herself and sewed, hearing no sound but the noise of the wind and the patter of the rain; now as the darker evening came—in that street it got dark so early—it was good to be able to rest her tired back a while, and walk up and down and

think dreamily of all the work she had been able to do that day. In these days she did much sewing, her husband gave her no money to buy new garments now.

And perhaps she made but little trouble out of that; those hours spent in sewing left her at least less time in which to think. So she had imagined at first; lately, a dull dreaming feeling, like that she felt now in listening to the wind seemed over all her life, and she dreaded her thoughts no more. That one terrible night had stunned her; she had never quite recovered after that. It was a comfort at any rate that the ache and burn of old resentment seemed almost to have left her, she could take things so much more quietly now. Walking up and down, listening in dreaming fashion to the wind, it would have been easy for anyone to see at once that she was changed; the soft, childish outline and bloom had almost left her features; her blue eyes had an old and wearied look, and her arms had shrunk a little and lost some of their roundness. Yet, and in spite

of these things, she did not look ill, but only quiet and tired, and not so lovely as of old. Others saw and remarked upon the change, and shook their heads over a certain event that lay before her now.

Meg also thought of that event as she walked up and down, and listened to the wind. But though that new thought made the only excitement of her life, it was a very faint hope indeed that stirred within her heart. The arms that hung listlessly down in front of her had no delicious longing for the time when they would have something small and soft to hold within their clasp; she felt almost too tired to care. "He will not like it, I shall never be able to look at it when he is near."

Oh, was this goodness? she asked herself as she walked up and, down whilst the grey evening darkened in the room. Was this tired listlessness the highest virtue, and was all her striving only to result in this? She had tried. Word by word she had followed the advice that had been given, she had shut

herself in her lonely life, and allowed herself no visits or society now. It had been rather hard at first. Letters had come, messages, men who wanted, they said, to see her husband, but who were quite willing to talk to her instead; she had locked herself in often that she might be sure of being alone. Then when they saw that she was resolute a new form of persecution began. Over and over again when she went out of doors she would meet an acquaintance at the corner of the street; it seemed strange to her that, alter her hour as she might, one or other would always be there as she passed by. In her innocence she suspected nothing, but happening one day to speak of this trouble to her rough good-natured landlady she was startled by the look of guilt that passed over her companion's face, and in an instant it occurred to her that these accidents might be more the result of previous contrivance than she had at first supposed. Her agony of tears and entreaties then melted the heart of Mrs. Clarke, who was a well-meaning

woman, though not too good for bribes, and who promised her faithfully never to betray her again. Meg had been too thoroughly frightened to be trustful, she stayed at home all the day, and went out only with her husband now.

No—once, one only time, a strange longing came over her, and she found her way through the streets to the Cathedral. Afterwards it remained in her mind as a curious vision, the number of people, the great dome crossed above with shafts of light, her own passionate entreaties as she knelt, and the way in which the music seemed to be always echoing and repeating those entreaties again for her. That was a comforting dream, but on coming out on to the marble steps she saw, or thought she saw, an acquaintance in the crowd, and hastened home at once. From that day she did not go out again alone.

Still the wish for religious training was present in her mind; she always said her prayers twice, and read a chapter every morning, feeling about as much pleasure in

these things as a conscientious child in the lessons that it sets itself—the sense of duty performed was the principal meaning that they had. There were other feelings that were more distinct within her heart; walking up and down, tired and depressed, in the dim lonely afternoons, a strange terror would come over her sometimes, a haunting dread lest she should be ill, and not have power to gain her strength again. She had no one to support or to console. Her husband had given her that letter of which we know, but he had commanded her to destroy it as soon as she had read it, and the chief feeling that it had left upon her mind was the conviction that she would not be able to see Mr. Arlathnot now.

During those long, lonely days the thought of a chance meeting with him was, notwithstanding, the principal comfort that she had. She would ask him questions again, and he would tell her to be good. For still, as in old years, her ignorance acknowledged but one teacher, and she leant all her trust on

him. The world has more than one—she was to find that out at last. That dark, gusty September afternoon was to be a memorable day for Meg.

She had been walking up and down, absorbed in her own depressed and dreary thoughts, and none the less ready to be absorbed in them, because experience had at length taught her to keep her troubles to herself. No doubt other people also have their sufferings; she recognised that now, but it brought no hope to her. So she walked up and down, and listened to the gusts, until all at once it came into her mind that there was another sound outside besides the moaning of the wind.

Almost frightened, she crept softly to the door. After an instant she heard the sound again. In another minute it came once more—more distinctly now.

"Pee-airns," it said; "pee-airns!"

Meg shook a little, as she softly set the door ajar that she might peep; she could not tell the meaning of this at all. In another

instant she saw. There on the floor outside lay a little writhing figure moaning softly to itself. Meg, with shame at her fright, recognised the sight at once. This was the Cripple-child.

That meant—that in the house in which she lodged there had now lived for some years a little diseased, deformed, and altogether distorted creature, who, out of charity, or because her services could be had cheap, had been a maid-of-all-work to the lower rooms. Meg had often seen her, and had always shrunk in young disgust and terror from the sight. Now, after her recognition, her first impulse was to close her door again.

But whilst she hesitated, the little writhing figure stirred itself, and the moaning cry, in which there was a piercing, desolate tone, came from it once more —

"Pee-airns; pee-airns."

It might have been the cry, or the sight of the little distorted thing, or some sudden impulse of pity. Meg could not tell why it

was: but in another instant she was down upon the floor by the side of the child.

"Does anything hurt you? Do tell me what it is," she said.

The little creature raised her face, a gurgoyle face, with mis-shapen features and little blinking eyes, all hot and bleared with tears. Her words came now in a tone that sounded sharp and bony as her face and form.

"Pens," she said.

"What?"

"*Pens*," said the Cripple-child, "I' my back, i' my side, oll-ovver. O-o-oh." She had opened her mouth, and Meg knew that the terrible cry would soon be coming.

"Oh, don't please cry out again," she said shrinking, "I can't bear to hear it. And, oh, do tell me why you lie upon the floor like this?"

"I don' want to start no-one," said the cripple, seated now, with her bony arms round her bony knees, like a gurgoyle that can change its position. "'A just lies upo' the flor to grun. Bet, she bet me a' morn,

cos a' grunned downstair. A' come 'ere to be quet, and grun' along, becos' the pens is bad."

"But you must get so cold upon the floor. I am sure it can't be good for you. Oh, don't cry again, please, but come into my room and rest."

The little gurgoyle sat up straighter on the floor on hearing that, considering with screwed-up eyes.

Meg waited no longer for reflection, but went back into her room, lighted the fire, placed by it the only low chair, then, returning, drew the little creature into the room, shut and locked the door, and, sitting down, took the child into her arms. With a weary sigh, the little ugly head pressed itself against her breast.

There then for two whole hours she held it, rocking it softly sometimes, murmuring little words over it, taking the little cold hands into her own. Only once did the creature raise herself at all. Meg was startled to see the little puckered face thrown back to look earnestly at her.

"Are you a angel?"

"No."

"Pretty—so pretty," murmured the Cripple-child.

It seemed content to rest; its pain, whatever it was, was soothed by warmth and care, and after a very little while it was asleep. Meg kept it still within her arms. As the hours passed on her heart began to beat rather quicker: it was getting towards the time for her husband to return. But as she waited, hesitating, she felt a slight movement, and then the little ugly head was raised once more. The child had a smile, as if scarcely waked from a dream, a curious screwed-up, and yet almost happy smile it was, she did not seem at all astonished to be there. Meg bent down to hear the whispered words—

"I thot m' bons was a' eat up wi' pen, and I wer' in 'Evin wi' you."

"Dear," whispered Meg, faltering, and amazed to see the sharp attentive gaze that was fixed on her at once, "dear, I can't bear

to disturb you, but my husband—you know my husband, don't you?"

"Ah—yes, Olbis," said the cripple, and got down at once.

For one instant only she paused, and bent her gurgoyle face over the fire, then turned to go. But Meg stopped her again.

"I want to tell you only one thing," she whispered softly, with a childish pity in her tones. "I can't bear to think that you should lie upon the floor when you are ill. Come to me to-morrow afternoon, and tell me how you are—to-morrow afternoon—you understand."

The little creature nodded and limped away at once.

Why should we linger over this? From that day there sprang up a strange friendship between Meg and the deformed child; day after day the little limping step would come along the passage to her room—evening after evening the gurgoyle face could be found before her fire. The little creature's ailments, whether rheumatism or not, seemed

soothed by warmth and rest, and Meg's afternoons were no longer lonely now.

That was a strange companionship. You would have thought so if you had seen them with the firelight upon them in the evenings, sitting together by the blaze, or helping each other to get out the tea. Sometimes, though not often, they would have games together, more often they would sit silent for as long as an hour at a time, the little cripple holding Meg's hand, and Meg staring into the flames, whilst her thoughts were far away. It was curious how old times would often come back upon her now.

Yes, and present and future too—the baby that was to be, this strange friendship, her own life which seemed scarcely so much like living now as like waiting for something that was still unknown to come. Perhaps it was her husband's constant talk of leaving London, perhaps the thought of approaching motherhood, she could not tell. It was a pleasant dreaming sense to have as she

sat resting by the fire, only she was afraid to consider what it meant.

"Will ye b' glad t' ha' a baby?" asked the cripple abruptly once.

She must have had word of it from some other inmate of the house.

"I don't know. I don't feel strong," said Meg. And then she got up and walked up and down the room.

After that she played games with the cripple. She would hide something, a book generally, and the cripple, who had stood meanwhile with her bony fingers clasped over her eyes, would limp round the room and look, whilst Meg sat and watched, laughing sometimes, on the rug before the fire. Sometimes they played at ball with a pocket-handkerchief rolled into as round a shape as could be made. Meg almost felt at these times as if she were a child again.

So they spent their afternoons and evenings together, their affection growing always as the days went on. The Cripple-child also

had its dreams, it would sit silent for a while, with its hand in Meg's, looking and smiling at the fire. One evening it told its secret in whispered confidence, it had a little hoard of money that it had saved through all its life. And it had made up its mind now. That money was to buy "a creddle."

Perhaps the thought had been put into the child's mind by the making of little garments in which it had assisted Meg. Anyhow, the idea had grown. The little creature, distorted in mind and body, had been a miser, hoarding up pence and sixpences in a stocking, till they had really reached something like a sum at last. Now all this precious hoard, that had never been employed to relieve any of its sufferings, was to go at once that Meg's baby might have a fine cradle in which to lie. It was to be a very grand cradle, with "less an' satting," as the cripple expressed it, the sort "o' creddle that the Queen might 'ave." Meg did her utmost to check this fancy, but in vain; the cripple

was too pleased with it to let it go. Indeed, words cannot express the love the little creature had for Meg. It would lie in her arms, or at her feet, whilst she told it Bible stories in simple words, gazing with blinking eyes into her face, or hiding its head in the folds of her dress—never satisfied unless it could be close to her. Meg loved the love, her poor, tired heart found itself soothed and healed, and she, too, could not be satisfied unless she was near the child.

"Oh! if y' was to go, what shud a' do?" the cripple said.

"We must try and go together," whispered Meg. And even as she said the words they seemed to have some meaning of which she would not stay to think. Sometimes she used to feel afraid in the long, dark autumn evenings, as she sat resting by the fire—a new sort of life was coming to her, it might bring fresh troubles, she had no strength to think of it. At any rate, she had this child who cared for her.

It was on one of those autumn days that something else occurred. She met Mr. Arlathnot again.

He had been ill, worried, vexed by various vague reports that had been spread of him, vexed, too, to think how helpless he was to rescue from any danger the life he had tried more than once to save, and concerned to find that his own health was going, and with the fear that he might be sinking prematurely into a broken-down old age.

One morning, with all these cares upon his mind, he happened to be near the City, standing on one of the bridges, and looking down on the water. He had been thinking of Meg, and as he turned round—she stood there by his side.

For the first instant he scarcely knew that he was not dreaming. Her face was turned upwards towards him as he had always imagined it; it was very pale, but the blue eyes were shining with true childish pleasure and delight.

"Oh, Mr. Arlathnot!" she said.

Then an instant afterwards —

"May I speak to you? Do tell me that it is not wrong."

"Oh, no, it's not wrong," he said, smiling. "I always said I would speak to you if we chanced to meet. But I must not keep you long. Do tell me all about yourself."

So she spoke as they walked down the bridge, and told him how she had kept her word to him. At the end of it they paused. People were passing and repassing; it was a clear, cold day, and a strong wind stirred the water.

"I am afraid you must feel lonely in the day sometimes," he said.

"Oh, no, I've got a friend."

And then, encouraged by his smile, she told him all about the Cripple-child. Arlathnot looked upon her face whilst she spoke; there was a childish brightness upon it, it appeared to him more lovely, but more delicate than before. He could not resist the temptation to ask her one question still.

"And—your husband?"

"He is very quiet," said Meg. "He never brings home people, or takes me anywhere now. Only he comes back so late; I am obliged sometimes to go out by myself. I think now and then there is only one thing that really troubles me now."

She stopped, flushing very much, and he waited for more.

"Oh, I can't help saying it," she said, with her eyes upon the ground; "it comes to me so when I lie awake at night—I can't help thinking that—that—if I have children—if I ever do—they will grow up poor and rough, and he will not like them, perhaps, and I shall not be able to teach them, or to bring them up as I should like to do. And that is so foolish, but still it troubles me."

"I do not think it is foolish," he answered gravely. "But you need not vex yourself with that. The day will come when your husband will understand me better, and then I will see that your children shall be educated as you like. You know I am quite alone, I do not need my money for myself."

He saw the tears start to her eyes, and she turned away her head. But she attempted no word of thanks. After a while she whispered below her breath —

"I am afraid I must be going."

"One word more—Meg, are you learning now, at last, to believe in God?"

She raised her face: he could see that tears and smiles were struggling together in her eyes.

"Oh, I must, indeed I must," she said, "because you are so kind, and He has given me the Cripple-child."

And then suddenly she turned away, and he lost sight of her at once. He went back across the bridge that he might not seem to follow after her.

All that night, all the next day, for many days after he had left London, that little scene, the bridge, the water, and the pale, childish face with the light in its eyes, seemed never absent from his mind. He scarcely knew why there should be so much foreboding in his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

Yes, it was all arranged at last. It was already sold, the red house with its creepers, and rose bushes, its limes and horse chestnuts, its dark garden paths, and view from the terrace of the country and winding stream beneath.

No more would any one of the family who had lived there so long gather round its ample fires in the winter, or lean out of their windows in the summer to pick the Gloire de Dijon roses that nodded their heads beneath. Sold now! indeed there was no longer any reason why it should be kept. Mr. Harman's youngest and last remaining daughter was engaged, and it was not to be supposed that he would care to inhabit the place alone.

Perhaps there was in his heart at this time a strange feeling of loneliness and discomfiture that had never been present there

before. Scarcely was it affection that caused this—he had parted from Miss Binia with no very deep regret, he had led Miss Anna to her destiny with pride, and Miss Kittie had never been his favourite of the three—nevertheless it had begun at last to dawn upon him that he would have to pass his old age alone. His daughters, indeed, promised that he should be often with him, but even if they kept their word he was not a man who could make himself easily comfortable in the house of another.

Under these circumstances it was natural that he should wish to have his own friends near him, and perhaps it was for this reason that he sent to Arlathnot a pressing invitation. The result, however, was not favourable. He came, bringing with him a wedding present, but he seemed out of spirits, and did not stay for long. Something was between the two men, they could not be intimate as they had been of old.

On one subject they never spoke. Mr. Harman had understood from his friend in

general terms that his niece had made an imprudent and unhappy marriage, and that she was still not much inclined to express penitence for her conduct towards himself—therefore, of course, that she was hardened and rebellious still. He himself had made one allusion afterwards to this—that was in a Sunday evening discourse to his household, when after reading of the judgments that wait on the perverse and unbelievers, he had referred to the punishment that had already overtaken one "who went out from ourselves." Besides this remark, and a few words addressed to his daughters, he had not referred to the subject again; and now that his friend was with him he never mentioned it at all.

There were other troubles of which Arlathnot spoke more freely, though even on these he was reserved. Some foolish calumnies had been raised against him, he said, and had given him much trouble, though he had thought it best to take no notice of them. Mr. Harman fully agreed with him in that.

He then added that they concerned him most with reference to the various charitable and religious societies of which he was a leading member, and that if the stories against him continued to gain ground he would give up his posts in these.

"That would be a fool's action, if you will forgive my saying so," Mr. Harman replied. "The world will suppose that you have declared yourself guilty without waiting for the accusations to be proved."

"I do not care for that. The cause of Christ ought not to be prominently served by one who is not reckoned good enough to be 'above suspicion.'"

"If you take the matter in that way, the only thing you can do is to have it thoroughly sifted. But I suppose you would not care to have your name dragged through the law courts."

Arlathnot assented by silence, without thinking it necessary to mention that his chief fear was for the name of another.

He looked ill and worn, as if some special vexations pressed upon his mind. Indeed

before he left London he had been subjected to many entreaties, and perhaps even the false reports, deeply as they disturbed him, were not so vexatious to him as the persistence of his friends. These, urged on, as he imagined at least, by Lady Clinton, had taken it strongly into their minds that he ought no more to live alone; he had never looked after himself, they said, and should be taken care of now. Arlathnot could not but think that the little lady, in spite of her reserve on his behalf, had intimated with tolerable plainness that he was in great need of guardianship—and he thought so still more when his lethargic half-brother, with whom he seldom exchanged more than a few words at a time, came to him with a definite proposal of sharing house and home. This he steadily resisted, even though Lady Clinton's charms were thrown in the balance, and she did her utmost to persuade.

"We all love you, Philip," she said, looking at him with entreating eyes, as if she thought his heart must melt at that.

Arlathnot could not explain to her in plain words that her affection might hardly compensate to him for the fact of being removed, with all his lonely ways, into the midst of one of the gayest houses in London.

Since one night he had altered a great deal. And yet in one respect it had caused little outward change in him: only a scarcely perceptible scar on his under lip, and the necessity for two false teeth, which were to him a source of some annoyance, and rather spoilt the effect of what had been a very charming smile. On the whole he thought he had escaped well from that.

So he came and went, kissing Kittie with much kindness at the last moment, after he had bestowed on her a bracelet more beautiful than any she had yet received. She had hoped much from him, for he was rather famous in that family for wedding presents, and yet on the whole she was glad that he was gone—the tall gentleman, with his worn face, and the bunch of seals, now always at his watch-chain, that his dead son had

owned, made her feel "shivery, and in the blues," she said. The next letter they had from him announced that he had returned to London and to his work again.

On that same November morning she went to visit her future home, now in course of being prepared for her. It was not a grand match that she was about to make, but then the two other sisters had married so well that Mr. Harman could afford to dispense with that. And after all the clergyman of the parish had private means and a very pleasant parsonage; even her grand relations owned that it was not so bad. Kittie tripped lightly along through the heavy lanes, her heart beating as lightly as her steps. It was her turn to have hopes, and be exulting now.

November mists lay thick and dull that day, the parsonage garden, so brilliant with its geraniums in the summer, lay veiled and shrouded now. But from the windows bright fires of welcome shone, and Mrs. Clarens was at home, come to prepare everything for her son's bride.

Kittie had promised to spend the morning at least alone with her. It was pleasant to be welcomed and petted, and to have her damp furs removed and pitied, and then to be placed in the easiest armchair, that she might get warm before ever she thought of looking at the house. And then after "just a minute's talk"—which lasted for an hour —of the poor and parish matters, and dear Edward's unselfishness, "so good he is, indeed he is," the mother said, it was pleasant to go upstairs and see all the new preparations that were being made for her, pleasant to give her opinion on many little matters of which she only could be judge, pleasant to stand by latticed windows and look out dreaming on the garden and the November mists below. And when that morning's work was over, pleasant also was the little luncheon arranged for two, and pleasant the hours afterwards of drifting talk and silent hopes as they sat together by the fire. Life had never seemed quite so interesting before.

"You are so good and unselfish, and so

ready to be pleased with everything," his mother said, "and you know so much about the poor already, and can help him so well in everything he does. You have not looked for wealth and position like your sisters; I cannot help thinking that if you are happy you will have deserved it all."

These words were in Kittie's ears as she went homewards through the mists. Arrived at home she retired to her room at once; she could not settle to any afternoon's employment now. She locked her door, and threw herself into a low chair by the fire, that she might rest there, and look into its light and dream. Its light was on her slender form and features as she dreamt, on the half-uncoiled plaits of light hair that dropped on her shoulders, and on the hand on which rested her engagement ring. She felt very happy, warm through all of her with pleasure and with hope, her grey eyes, once so sharp, had gained a softer light.

"It is true," she murmured softly to herself, "I have not cared for wealth and rank,

and I do like the poor and their ways, and making people happy, as she said, I can't help thinking that I do deserve it, after all."

Alas! was it to be supposed that in that instant she would remember that this wish for making others happy had come rather late in life, that if it had not waited for the touch of her own love to awaken it, the misery of another might have had no helping hand from her. "Deserve it all!" What is it we deserve, what sort of voices are those, not attended to, never even remembered by us, that cry out from our past against our lives? God keep us all from reaping our deserts, I say.

However this may be, it is certain that elsewhere the November mists rested blacker and heavier than they did round Kittie's country home, and that whilst she sat and dreamed Mr. Arlathnot was finding his way slowly through the darkness of London streets, summoned by a hasty messenger to take his leave of Meg.

CHAPTER XII.

NIGHT had already fallen on Holborn, although it was still early in the afternoon. Through the pall of heavy fog the lamps shone dim and faint, vehicles could scarcely move, passers-by could not see each others' faces as they went. Distant noises had a strange, unreal sound; lights, people, houses were all phantoms in the darkness, and still the dense fog pressed on brain and eyes, the heavy weight that makes an intolerable night. To Arlathnot, finding his slow way as best he could, had come once again the feeling of being in a strange dream, from which he could not wake.

Only more strange and sad, more deep and terrible than it had been before. For it was of no danger of his own that he was thinking now, and we are never so appalled and powerless as before the calamity of another that we have no power to avert. As

he went along, feeling his way slowly, it seemed to him as if he were stretching out vain arms in the darkness to save his friend's child and darling, the young life that he had tried to help. Could he do no more, and was this then in very truth the end?

Oh, he could see the whole scene still before his eyes as he had heard it, Meg sitting at her window, the little cripple crossing the street to do some errand at the shop across the road for her—then the cab coming swiftly round the corner, the little form crushed in an instant under the horses' hoofs, Meg rushing down in wild agony to give what help she could, then fainting and falling as the small, terrible sight was drawn from beneath the wheels. They said she had hurt herself in falling; they said the shock had been too much for her; whatever the cause she had been "in convulsions like" for all the night, and had never regained her senses after that.

Arlathnot seemed to see the whole scene as he went on through the fog.

Still at first, even after the first few days had passed, they had hoped at least to be able to save her life. But the wasting fever had kept on day after day, returning with renewed force after every respite, until at last their most persistent hopes had failed. Now and then she had been better, and had got up and dressed and sat in her chair, but even then she had no clear memory or understanding—she would murmur that the cripple had gone away, and she ought not to stay behind. And then at last one night she had slept without interruption, and had wakened more sensible and like herself, and had spoken of her husband's breakfast, and said she must get up to prepare it; and Mrs. Clarke had left the room in more hope and comfort than she had known before. And then what had happened afterwards Mrs. Clarke did not exactly know, but she had returned to find that Meg had left her bed, and was pacing up and down her room in wild agitation and distress, repeating over and over again that she knew that she was

dying, that she could not die, that she was afraid, she was not good enough to die, sobbing out these words whilst the tears streamed down her face. It was supposed that she had heard the cook and one of the lodgers talking of her on the stairs, and this sudden knowledge of her state, coming in the midst of her illness, had been more than her weakness could bear. That morning the fever returned, and from that hour the doctor said all hope was gone.

From that day she had never talked distinctly or regained her consciousness. But in the beginning of her illness she had often mentioned Mr. Arlathnot's name, and Mrs. Clarke had at last found out where he lived, and determined to send for him.

"She were too good, too pretty and too good," said, in the midst of fast-falling tears, the charwoman, through whom the news had come. "Often and often 'ave I seen 'er read 'er chapter in the mornin's—a pretty lamb she was. And 'er 'usband, 'e's quite mad like, and will 'ave it there's nothin' wrong

with 'er at all. I'm sure if she isn't right, there's no chance for any of us, there's not. We knew it, all of us—often and many a time I've 'eard the cook repeat: 'Mrs. Smithers,' she says, 'mark my words, she'll never live to see much of 'er child at all.' And if you could come to 'er, sir, it might do some good to 'er, indeed it might; she can't last much longer now, the doctor says."

These words were in Arlathnot's ears as he went on through the dark fog towards her home.

"Not much longer—much longer," the words kept repeating themselves. Oh, only a few days before he had heard of the death of Mrs. Semmons, who had revived from her first attack, and had died peacefully at last in the arms of her repentant son. There had seemed nothing terrible in that. But this child of seventeen, so much younger than himself—so afraid too—it could not be true. And then he told himself that he must hasten to give her all the comfort that he could.

Lights in shops, people, houses, lamps burning darkly through the fog—there seemed no end to these. In the midst of them he found, with difficulty, the small, dark street at last. And there, in the drizzling darkness of the winter afternoon, and the mist to which the fog was turning, he stood for the first time before her door.

Mrs. Clarke opened it. Even in the darkness he could see how red her eyes were, and even then it could strike him that tears were not the only cause of this. She spoke eagerly to him.

"Oh, sir, are you Mr. Arlathnot? I'm that Mrs. Clarke as sent for you. Oh, will you not come in?"

But he preferred to stand still upon the doorstep, and hear how Mrs. Holbis was. She was quiet now; it seemed that she always had these states of exhaustion between her delirious fits. If he would only come in they would tell him when she "knew anything" (*i.e.*, was conscious) again, and he might do good to her.

"Does Mr. Holbis know I am here?" asked Arlathnot after a pause, and with that contraction of the brow that meant painful thoughts with him.

"He, sir?" she said, staring. "He's at his work, away somewhere; we none of us daren't speak to him."

"But he comes home, I suppose—at night?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and often he come to ask how she is doin', though he will have it that she isn't ill. He'll soon be coming now, I think."

"Then I will wait outside until he comes," and without staying for another word, Arlathnot descended the one step into the fog. There was a struggle of terrible pain in his mind, but he would not let himself hesitate, he dared not risk hesitation, there was still more reason now that his promise should be kept. By the side of what might be her deathbed that old, dreadful conflict should not be renewed again.

And yet the struggle in his mind was none the less miserable for that. As he walked up and down in the darkness, chilled and wet to the very bones by the mist that slowly replaced the fog, he could not bear to think that he was losing the only moments that might be granted to him in which to give help to her; there was a desperate appeal in his mind for the young life and soul that he was deserting now. It seemed to him, as it always does seem at such instants, that he only was responsible for help, that if the young soul went in lonely, struggling agony out into the final darkness the fault and guilt were his. And yet, though in wretchedness he felt as if he were thrusting from him the small, clinging hands now in that supreme moment when they needed help the most, he dared not break his promise and enter the house to give assistance now.

Slowly the hours passed; he paced up and down the street, wet, cold, tired, hearing his footsteps as he went. The fog lifted, and

there was only the gloom of the drizzling mist, then that, too, grew darker as in slow silence the winter evening came.

All at once a man passed him and went rapidly down the street. Arlathnot, before he had time to think, had seemed to recognise, even in its passionate rapidity, the firm and heavy tread he knew. For one instant he stood still; then he followed. He had been right; the man, scarcely distinct in the gloom, was standing now before the door.

Arlathnot came up as the door opened. He could not hear the words that were said, they were very few, the door closed again, and Holbis, who had not gone in, turned to go down the street. Arlathnot, standing by one of the lamps that he might himself be recognised, could see his face as he came, pale, quiet, with a look in his eyes as of one who is walking in his sleep. He touched Arlathnot's elbow as he passed, the lamplight was full on his face, and their eyes met, but he did not know him, and passed on. Only when the other, in despair, put out his

hand and took hold of his arm, did he stop and turn round with a convulsive start as if he had indeed been awakened out of sleep.

"Who is it?" he muttered in a choked, thick voice. "And what d'ye want with me?"

"Do you not know me?"

Their eyes met. Over Holbis's pale, heavy features there came for one instant a change of expression that was like a start, and then he spoke again.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said wearily. "What is it that you want?"

"They tell me that your wife is ill. I know something of sickbeds, and might think of some way to help. Will you allow me to see her?"

Holbis looked at him with blank eyes, as if he had not put together or understood a word.

"I might be able to rouse her, quiet her," scarcely knowing what he said. "I have been with fever cases before. I wish you would give me your permission, indeed it might be best."

Still Holbis only looked with the same blank, heavy expression on his face. It was by a great effort that he roused himself even partially at last.

"See her? Of course anyone may that likes," he said in slow, monotonous tones, "if there's any good to be had at all from that. You don't suppose I would keep anything from her now that she is ill? But it's all folly what they say, all the same, there's nothing much amiss, only a little fever and that sort of thing. It would be a good thing if she could be quietened, though," he added with a sudden change of manner, and then he took Arlathnot's offered hand and held it. All his former feeling seemed to have passed entirely from his mind; his companion dimly understood that in that moment he was willing to grasp at any help that he could find.

"I say," he muttered in a low voice, "you will stay till I come back, and tell me what you think of her?"

Arlathnot only nodded in reply, and then stood still watching as the heavy footsteps

and the heavy figure went down the winter darkness of the street. His own deep sigh, as he turned, was not caused now only by fear for Meg.

Still he could see her; he thanked God, at least, for that. He found his way quickly back to the house, and was admitted at once. She was still sleeping, Mrs. Clarke said. He was shown into a dark parlour, and remained there for about an hour, thinking and praying, or walking up and down, and looking at the shadows and the fire. Then, suddenly the door opened, and Mrs. Clarke stood on the threshold.

She was in a state of much subdued excitement, if not of joy; her voice came in low, whispered gasps, and he had some difficulty in understanding all the words she said.

"Oh, and Mrs. Holbis was so much better—she had waked quite sensible like—and when she had told her Mr. Arlathnot was coming she had understood it every word, and all. Oh, and the doctor he had said it

was the fever that was so bad for her; and she did think that now she was waked she might be better now." The broken sentences came with honest tears. Arlathnot said no word at all, but followed her upstairs.

As they paused before the door it occurred to him to remember that he had not yet thought what words of comfort he would say. His mind was too confused to think. She opened the door and closed it behind him.

The next instant he could feel only that he was again face to face with Meg.

CHAPTER XIII.

She lay amongst her pillows, and smiled at him. Arlathnot met her glance with that sudden movement of the heart with which we greet a familiar face again.

And, for the first instant, there seemed, indeed, so little difference. It was a large, bare room in which she was lying, a room with very little furniture, which looked as if it was not often used. The bed, which stood in the midst, was a half-tester, with a dark-grey back and curtains, a great heavy counterpane, with a thick pattern upon it, fell down to the ground upon each side. The blinds were down; there was one candle upon the little table by the bed; everything looked bare and desolate. But there, propped up on the white pillows, was Meg's lovely face; her cheeks were flushed, her lips a little parted, and her blue eyes smiled their eager, childish welcome at him. It was all so

natural that, for one instant, the thought of the danger of which he had heard seemed to pass from him like a bad dream that we can forget when it has gone.

"Oh, Mr. Arlathnot," she said.

He came to the side of the bed and looked at her. She raised her face eagerly towards him; there was in her manner a more than usual pleasure and anxiety to speak.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come," she said. "And now I can tell you all the beautiful dreams I've had."

He drew back a little; the words smote him as with sudden pain. Once more he looked with a steady glance at her. Her cheeks were burning, the little hand, that was now outside the counterpane, was hot and dry, the fever had not left her yet.

"I am so very glad that you have come," she said; "I must make haste, I am so afraid I shall not have time to tell it all before I go."

"Before you go—where?" he asked, keeping his voice as gentle and steady as he could.

"Oh, a long, long way—don't you know of that?" said Meg. "And you know it is because it is so far that I get so tired sometimes. But I shall rest quite well as soon as I get back there again."

She lay silent, her eyes had a far-away look, and her lips were smiling softly to herself. Arlathnot stood by her side, too much distressed to speak.

"And I should like to tell you," she said at last, as if there had been no pause between her words, "because I always wanted to tell you it all before I went again."

He thought it would soothe her, perhaps, to speak, and sat down upon a chair by the bed. She kept her old position, lying back and looking in front of her as if she could see him there, her blue eyes bright, her cheeks still flushed, and her soft hair falling about her face. Already he could observe a change in her; she did not turn to look towards him now, his entrance had only been able to rouse her for a while.

"It was all so long ago . . . " she said;

"I could not find the Cripple, and I wanted so to look. . . . Only it got dark, and I was so tired, and yet I had to go. And all the lights shone out in Regent Street, as if they were looking at me, and I got so frightened there. . . . And then I went on farther and farther, as if it would never end; and I had never been so tired before, and the stones hurt my feet, and kept telling me that it was because I ran away from home. I was so frightened and so tired. And then"—

And here she stopped, and her eyes smiled to herself once more. Arlathnot feared that she would not speak again. But she turned towards him at last.

"I don't know that you care to hear," she said, in a soft and plaintive voice. "And yet it was so beautiful—indeed it was."

"Oh! but I do," he said. Yet for a while she lay still, her eyes looking in front with the same faint smile as if she were seeing far away. And then in the same low, dreaming tones she spoke again.

"The moon was shining. . . . I had

never seen it shine like that before. . . . And I was aching so, and was so frightened, I seemed to be nothing else but pain. And then . . . there was a little bare piece of ground, quite bare it was . . . and in the middle of it . . . you will never think of what was there. . . . It was like a great cross, just like the ones one sees in the pictures—only it was quite rough and bare . . . like two rough bits of wood that were put together and were left. And then it came to me that I must just lie down by that . . . and then all the ache and the pain went out at once and I could rest—I had never felt at rest like that before. . . . But I was a little feared still—and then I heard the speaking. You will never think of that. It was very little, only just a few words. But it was so kind in what it said. It said 'Don't be frightened, Meg.'"

Arlathnot said nothing. He turned away his head that the tears might roll unheeded down his face. She spoke again after a while.

"And I thought I might lie and rest there as I was. Only I could not. And now I am a long way off, and I must get there again. I want so to lie down there . . . that I may rest. . . ."

The last words came in an exhausted whisper, she lay with her eyes half-closed, her face was paler now, like that of a tired and almost sleeping child. Arlathnot looked at her, and told himself that there was no use in further hoping now.

"Meg," he whispered softly. He had not thought to rouse her, but she moved her face a little. He felt if there were any words of comfort to come from him, that he must give them now. "Meg," he whispered softly again, "must you be starting soon?"

He hoped in this way to find if she had any knowledge of her state.

"Oh! yes, soon—soon," she said, with a long, deep breath as she lay with half-closed eyes. It was strange to sit so close to her and hear. In that instant there came over Arlathnot a wondering, solemn feeling that

took entire possession of him, a feeling as if he, too, were close to the brink of the invisible world, to which she was so near. And with that came, all at once, the overwhelming longing that has seized on others besides himself at such a time. For one moment he did not think of her.

"Meg," he whispered, with low, subdued eagerness, "you are going soon to that land —will you take a message there for me?"

"Oh! yes, I should be so glad," she murmured, but he did not know if she understood entirely what he said.

"Say for me" — and here he paused, and knew not how to proceed. To whom indeed, should this message into the far-off land be sent? Wife? Son? No. And yet he felt as if there were something he must say. He covered his face with his hands, as one might do who prayed. "Say for me" — and then the words he needed came at last. "Say I am sorry."

What did he mean by that? He could not have told, I think he did not know. And

yet perhaps if we too could send the words we spoke out into the distant world, such words as those would rise the first for us. She was lying now with her eyes shut, and he feared to disturb her further. What comfort could he give? Had not comfort been sent to her? Was she, indeed, in need of words or help from him? He rose to his feet to go. Perhaps the movement roused her; perhaps she had been even in her feverish, dreaming state more conscious than he knew. As he bent over her she fixed her eyes on him with a curious, sad, entreating look that was more like herself, though the fever pulses began again burning in her cheeks. Her voice came low and brokenly, with more weakness in it than before.

"I wanted to say always . . . I know I was a bad girl. . . . I should not have left my home like that. . . . It has been very hard for me. . . . I should like to lie down now and rest."

Arlathnot stood leaning over her. He was accustomed to sick beds, he did not lose

his composure easily, and yet at that moment he knew that he would have broken down at once and utterly if he had even tried to pray. She lay with closed eyes, quite quiet—why should he disturb her with his grief? With that one look he turned away.

Overcome and broken down he stood in the passage, leaning against the wall, and weeping. Then, recovering himself, he found his way downstairs. Mrs. Clarke met him with a candle, asked him a few questions, to which he answered he did not quite know what, and then showed him to the same room where she had left him by himself before. For he had said, and she seemed relieved to hear it, that he had promised to wait till Mr. Holbis came. One more word he spoke, as she stood lingering by the door.

"Could you not send—a clergyman?"

"Oh! sir, Mr. Holbis," and as if that was all that was needed for answer she went at once. Too tired to weep, or even to pray, connectedly, he sat down, and waited without moving in the dark, cold parlour for about

an hour. Once there had been a stir and movement in the house, the opening of the door beneath, and the tread of a man's foot-step on the stairs. Then there was silence again.

Mrs. Clarke came for him at last, and exclaimed because she found him in the dark. Mr. Holbis had come, was with her, would he not like to come and see him now? He followed her without a word up the stairs. When they reached the sick room, she opened the door without knocking. He could see within for that minute, the light of firelight and candle, the dark-grey curtains, and Holbis bending forwards in the chair beside the bed—he could hear the indistinct utterances of her restless, moaning voice, and the man's tones whispering that she had been quiet a while before, she would soon be better now. He could not bear it, and moved back into the passage again.

Mrs. Clarke came to him, and told him that the fever had returned. Did he not wish to see Mr. Holbis? but he shook his

head at that. Then she asked him to come to her room, but he preferred to go back to the dark, cold parlour where he had been before. She left a candle on the table there for him. There, then, he waited, praying and walking up and down for endless hours till great part of the night was gone. He sat down at last, and sank, worn out, into a stupor in which all consciousness was lost.

The sound of voices, angry, disputing voices, the loud tone of a man's anger—and he himself was out in the passage, he scarce knew how, and in the midst of it all. The dim candlelight was on the pale, bewildered faces, and Mrs. Clarke had caught hold of his arm, and was appealing to him.

"Oh! sir, how can I help it at all, when it's what the doctor says? He's been and gone, and looked at her while she slep', he says she can't last a many hours now. And I was to tell him here—and he—he won't believe—he won't hear me at all, he won't," and then she cried.

"It's not true, I tell you, it's not true,".

the hoarse tones in their agony replied. "It's not the doctor I care for, there's One higher than the doctor, I should think *He*—He knows she's all I have in earth or Heaven —*He*—He wouldn't take her from me—I say He will not—I say—I—I"—the struggling words could find no utterance now.

"Oh! sir, the doctor says"—

Holbis raised his arms with an oath, but Arlathnot broke from Mrs. Clarke, and caught his hands.

"Hush, hush," he whispered, without knowing what he said. "We will not say anything—not a word. We will be very quiet, and go back and watch with her."

To his surprise the man submitted at once, and they found their way through the darkness up to the sick-room again.

Slowly, with endless slowness, the night passed on, as they waited in silence there, sitting one on either side of the bed. An awful stillness, a pale, sleeping face, one candle burning, Mrs. Clarke lying on the sofa at the further end, snoring sometimes,

faint, distant noises from the streets—all passed like a dream.

Arlathnot sat quite still, pale and stern, with his lips pressed together, and his eyes upon the child-face always ; Holbis leant upon the bed towards her with a hungry gaze, touching her fair hair softly sometimes with his finger, whispering that she was sleeping so well—she would wake and be better soon. The whispers fell into the awful stillness of the night; perhaps that checked him; he, too, became motionless at last. And still the night passed on.

It was towards morning. Mrs. Clarke had wakened about an hour before and sat up on the sofa, but no one had spoken, or but for that had moved. The grey light was beginning to grow brighter, and the candle to burn dim within the room, when Arlathnot, looking down upon her face, saw that a change had come. His glance met that of his companion, but neither of them moved. For those instants they seemed to hold their breath.

She stirred a little, and opened her eyes with a weary movement, like that of an exhausted child. There was no fever in her face now, only an utter weariness, and a sort of wonder, as if she did not know why she should be there, or feel so weak. Her eyes met those of Arlathnot for one instant; she seemed to recognise him, but she was restless, and moved her head at once. Then she remained quite still, looking up with awe, as if her glance were held by the agony that bent towards her in her husband's face.

Holbis kept his old position, leaning forwards with his arms upon the bed; he did not move or breathe, and Meg looked up at him. Then all at once she made a movement as if she would raise her face to his. But he did not stir. Arlathnot bent over her to help. As he did so he drew back suddenly; there came a change in her face, her head fell back slightly; there was a movement in her throat.

One instant's terrible silence, and then Holbis sprang to his feet, stretching out his

arms with a cry that rang through the room, the house, out into the street beyond. And even as he did so his knees gave way, and he fell down upon the floor.

He had roused the house; there were many footsteps on the stairs. Arlathnot felt at once that this was no longer a place for him. He pressed his way blindly through the people, muttering that if they needed help they were to send at once for him, and so got out into the street and the morning light, and at last, after a long while, and as in a dream, back into his rooms once more.

"The Lord takes back the lambs—the lambs—" he kept repeating to himself as if he were bewildered, "and takes them back in His arms."

Then he locked himself in and spent the day alone, in such tears as he had never yet given to any sorrow or trouble of his own.

CHAPTER XIV.

THREE slow days passed. He kept alone as much as was permitted to him, spending the long hours over letters and accounts. On the evening of the third day he sat writing letters, when he heard that a messenger had come from Holborn for him.

It was the son of Mrs. Clarke, a promising, tall young man, apprenticed to a grocer, who came in all wet and shivering with the damp, dark evening, and looked round him at the comfortable room as if he had never been in such a place before. He had come from his mother to beg that Mr. Arlathnot would come at once, for they thought that Mr. Holbis would make away with himself—yes, that indeed they did. Arlathnot insisted that he should sit down by the fire, and, as the lad's shyness wore off, by degrees he heard the rest.

"He had been very quiet for the first day or

two, Mr. Holbis had; they had never thought he would be so quiet as that. Only now and then he would go up to—to her," said the lad, shuddering, "as she lay so pretty-like upon the bed, and he would touch her hair, or her neck, and say that no other man in all the world dared do that but him. And then, sir, he burst out like all at once, and said they'd never be together again, and said he'd better have killed her some day when she was angry, and then they could have gone to hell and been together there."

Arlathnot shuddered as he heard.

"And he cried at last, sir, like anything, and they got him quite away to my mother's room, where he could sit alone. And he sat there all the evening like and groaned, with his head upon his arms, and they kept on nailing the coffin, and he said that every nail was driven through his heart."

"How thoughtless and cruel! They should have had him in some room where he could not hear at all."

"Oh, sir, in a Lon'on house we can hear

every sound always all over that a coffin makes."

"True, yes; I beg your pardon. Please go on. And the funeral was" —

It had been that day as it seemed.

"Though I can't bear to think of her being buried, sir—that, indeed, I can't. And he was quite quiet, and didn't seem to care, and said he'd heard of work in the country, and was going there to stay. And then, when we came back, for we hadn't dare to ask him for to come with us, he was sitting all alone there by himself; and he'd got a pistol, an old thing like, sir, in his hand, and he said he was to be let alone, or he'd kill anyone as dared come near to him. And he've sat there ever since, all through the hours to-day, and it's getting dark now, but he do sit there still, and he hasn't ate a morsel not sin' yesterday at break'ast time, and they daren't go near, for they're all so feared of him."

Arlathnot waited to hear no more, but set out with the lad at once.

Perhaps he was not sorry to be doing something; those three lonely days, incapable of rest, had been intolerable in their misery to him. It was not only this scene through which he had so lately passed; the link that had connected him with former times was gone, and the sorrow of two years past was a re-opened wound once more.

Holborn, with its lights and cheap shops, passed by him like a dream; he reached the dark house in the dark street again.

There was great excitement there. An untidy maid let them in; Mrs. Clarke herself was in the passage with the rest. Arlathnot did not forget the sight which he saw as he stood with the others by the open door; the dark room, lit only by the gas in the passage without; the dark, haggard figure seated by the table with head bowed on its arms upon it, and the rusty weapon in its hand. For one instant he looked; then moved to go in.

A chorus of voices interrupted him—the

shrill tones of women—"Bless and save you, sir, what are you thinking now?" the deeper words of a man, "It's not safe; no, that indeed it's not," and a child's little whisper, "Oh, don't let the gentleman be hurt." They were in his way; it was with some difficulty that he moved.

"Let me pass, if you please," he said.

He had been compelled to speak loud, and at the sound of the familiar voice, for an instant Holbis raised his head. Then he laid it down again with a shivering groan upon his arms. Arlathnot stooped over him, and took the pistol from his hand. There was no resistance, save that for a while he could not unclench the strong fingers from their passive deadly clasp; he handed it to the young grocer who stood by him, and, sitting down, put his arm softly over the bent shoulders on the table. Again there was no movement; but he fancied that his touch could soothe. He signed to the young grocer to go away, to shut the door on the others, and to leave them alone together.

There, then, he remained through the dark hours, not stirring, keeping his arm upon the bent shoulders still. For a long while there was quiet. Then a sudden noise in the street disturbed his companion and he started up. A violent frenzy succeeded, oaths, weeping, songs, broken sentences, a madness that had lost all semblance of control. Over and over again he struggled to the window in the darkness to throw himself out, and Arlathnot held him back with all the strength he could. Now and then he would be exhausted, and then, after a while, the weeping, laughing, struggling would all commence again. That was a terrible conflict. Arlathnot kept fearing, and not without reason, that he would not at last be strong enough to help. But we need not dwell too long upon all that passed that night.

Towards morning Arlathnot found a match and struck a light. There was some comfort in that, though the sight revealed was terrible enough to see. Holbis was lying half-fainting

in a chair, his face was pale and covered with blood from a blow received unawares in the darkness, and he had torn his clothes to relieve the oppression on his breast. At last he seemed now too intensely tired to move. Arlathnot sat down near to support him, as he could; the strong man leant, utterly exhausted, against him, as if he were a tired child, and so leaning fell at last to sleep. Arlathnot kept himself awake and watching for a while, but he was too tired to preserve his consciousness long.

With a start he woke. The grey morning light was in the room, and with that sudden recollection that comes after pain he knew at once both where he was and what had been. All through his sleep he had felt his companion's head against his shoulder, but it was now no longer there, and a quick terror held his breath. Only for a moment, then he saw Holbis sitting on the floor against the wall, his arms clasped round his knees, and his eyes fixed steadily on him. As he saw that his companion was awake and looking

at him he rose; his manner and face were very quiet and pale.

"You needn't fear," he said, "I'm in my senses now."

Arlathnot tried to speak, but was too fatigued, his head too giddy and confused for words.

Holbis came close and looked at him, in pity for his prostration as it seemed.

"You're very tired, sir," he said. "You had better lie down and sleep on the sofa there. There's something, though, if you don't mind, I should like to say to you."

He stood still, looking on the ground and twisting his hands, without raising his eyes to his companion once.

"I want to say—I know—I"— the words came struggling now, "I know I did what was wrong and bad by you. You never meant anything but good to me and her, I felt that always through it all. But I was mad always in all that had to do with her. That's done with now. It's my fault, I felt how it would be from the first. There's a voice

that's kept calling out on me through all the years—a dead girl's voice—she must be dead by now. I knew no good would come of it, and yet I would go on with it in spite of all. It's done with now; God knows He's punished me enough" —

Arlathnot would have answered, but his head was too heavy, and he found he could not speak. With some difficulty he staggered to the sofa and lay down there and slept.

Hours afterwards he woke to find the morning bright within the room. Holbis was sitting by him to watch him whilst he slept, and brought him now a tumbler of water that had the day before been given to himself. With the help of this and his sleep he was revived.

Then Mrs. Clarke knocked at the door in some terror (for all the lodgers had been disturbed that night), and at his request she showed him another room, where he put his hair and coat in order, and began to feel more like himself again.

He had said that he would have breakfast with his companion, and when he came back to the room where he had been before he found it already laid, and Holbis sat down with him. Holbis also had in some degree arranged himself, and seemed very quiet, but his hands trembled and his face was deadly pale. He had a feverish thirst, but was still all but unable to eat. Arlathnot did the honours of the table as well as he could, and spoke a few words on the weather and indifferent subjects till the meal was cleared away.

Then he seated himself by his companion, looking him full in the face with the dark, soft glance of which he had learnt to know the power.

"And what are you going to do now?" he said.

Holbis did not answer for a while. There was a slowness in his manner when he did—the slow, weary despair that is in no haste to speak.

"I have heard of some work in the

country," he said, "and perhaps I shall go there to get away from here. It doesn't matter. I am done for now."

"I hope," said Arlathnot gravely, "that you will learn to have more faith in the mercy of God than that."

"I can't help it. I must say it because it's true. No other man can know what I feel for me. Yeste'en it made me mad to think they'd left me not so much as a bit of her to keep; I felt as if I must go and tear up the earth and the lid, that I might have one of those soft curls of hers the coffin's holding now. I don't feel like that to-day; but it's none the better for being the quieter now. I've had hell in my heart for years. No other man can know what that means for me."

He was silent, leaning his elbows on the table, and his head upon his hands. Arlathnot got up and walked to the window, and then came back again and sat down close to him. He wanted to speak, but he found that he must turn his face away before he could.

"Listen for one moment," he said, in a very low voice, "whilst I say what I would say to no other man on earth but you. If you tell me that you have had a grief that has broken your brain and soul together, that will never leave you so much strength or hope for life again, I can tell you that I know that feeling too. If you say that you have dying words against you, haunting you always in your ears, I can say that I have that wretchedness as well."

There was silence.

"Ought we not all of us to have pity on each other? If you would only let me help you now" —

Again, after a while, for his emotion could not be easily subdued —

"I am going down to my country home to-morrow. Will you not come there and stay a few days, at least, with me? It is a pretty country, and we shall be quiet together there."

He ventured to look round now. Holbis said nothing, but grasped his hand, and then,

rising, stood looking out of the window with his back to his companion. Arlathnot thought that he had triumphed. But the man's face, though quiet and pale, was resolute when at last he turned. Arlathnot had risen and taken his hat for going. They stood by each other.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you again and again," he said. "No one can know, as I do, all you've done for me this night. I should have been a dead man by morn if it hadn't been for you. And I didn't deserve it at your hands, indeed. But it wouldn't do. I know, I feel it would only be worse for us; I dare not do it—no, indeed, I daren't. I'll manage somehow by myself, and I'll think, if I've strength for it, of what you said to me — If there were more like you, the world would be better than it is. I'll say that always whilst I live — God bless you, sir. Good-bye."

They grasped hands and parted.

Arlathnot's uneasiness was so great, that late that morning, after he had rested, he

went down Holborn and into the dark street again. But his journey was in vain, Holbis had already gone, and had left no direction behind him.

Tired and discouraged, he went back to his rooms, intending to remain there for the day. But there he found a note just arrived from Mr. Harman, desiring him to come to him at once. Under other circumstances he would have refused, but Meg's uncle seemed just now to have a claim on him, and he would have no other opportunity. So he rested again a while and went.

Mr. Harman sat alone in his study, not writing, with his head on his hand, and an open letter by his side. Arlathnot recognised his own letter of three days ago, and knew at once that he was right in suspecting why his friend had sent. Mr. Harman's forehead was clouded, his face did not look sad, but hard and thoughtful: the fact of being idle was strange enough for him.

"Sit down," he said, with rather more than his usual abruptness, and without

volunteering any other greeting at all. Only, after a moment, with some sudden surprise that for a while dispelled his mood, "You are as white as a sheet. What has been going wrong with you?"

"Nothing, thanks. At least, I am not ill. I can't stay more than a few minutes. You sent for me to ask me, I suppose" —

There was silence, and Mr. Harman's hand fidgeted the letter on the table. Then he spoke, not looking at it or at his companion, but out of the window on to the blank wall beyond, on which the sunlight shone.

"I have only one question to ask," he said in a low, constrained voice; "that will not take up too much of your few minutes, I suppose."

Then there was silence for a while.

"Did—*she* ever express any real penitence for her conduct to us?"

"I have told you her words—the last distinct words she said."

"Yes—yes—I daresay," with an impatient

movement of the hard hand upon the table. "But what I want to know is—did she ever, then or before, express more particular penitence than that?"

"I do not understand you."

"Did she ever say—then or before, it does not matter when"—still staring out of the window on to the blank wall beyond, "that she knew we had been kind to her, that we had brought her up and been good to her, that she had shown the basest ingratitude for all the care she had from us—did she ever say that, anything like that, in all the time you knew her?"

"No."

"Did she ever express a wish to return to us?"

"Never."

Mr. Harman withdrew his eyes from the window, and looked down upon the hand that rested on the table.

"I am sorry to hear it," he said slowly, "because I cannot now have a good opinion of the state of mind in which she died—she

does not seem even to have understood—This is what comes of bringing up other people's children. And I suppose that you lay all the blame on me?" The last words came more suddenly.

Arlathnot, hearing them, was silent in his turn for a while.

"I think she did very wrong, very foolishly," he said.

"That is not what I mean; you know it is not."

Again there was silence.

"If you think I am not hard enough upon her," said Arlathnot then in a low voice, and without raising his eyes, "remember two things more—I stood by her dying bed a few days ago, and she was seventeen."

There was a long pause, and then Mr. Harman rose.

"We will never speak of this again," he said. "There is no use in that. I suppose your few minutes are almost ended now."

There seemed no use in prolonging the conversation, so his companion rose as well.

"I'll write you a few lines as soon as I get home," he said, as cheerfully as he could, "and tell you how my farm buildings are getting on. You must feel rather lonely now the girls have gone."

"Yes—humph—women never much good. Well, good-bye," was all Mr. Harman said. And they parted.

Arlathnot, returning to his rooms, told himself that his companion of old days had not been more hard than he had expected him to be, on the whole had been altogether exactly like himself. What then was his surprise to receive that same evening another note from Mr. Harman—a circumstance, the like of which had certainly never occurred before.

"If you have nothing better to do with yourself," it said, "I should be glad if you could come up and spend an hour or two with me."

Putting aside the wonderful fact that Mr. Harman had written two notes in a day, there was something sufficiently extraordinary in

the short epistle itself. Arlathnot pondering over it as he rose hastily from his lonely dinner, decided immediately that his old acquaintance must be ill. The alarm of this was sufficiently powerful to make him forget his own fatigue; he started for Bayswater again. As he got into the cab it seemed to him that he felt a light touch on his arm, and, as he turned his head, that Meg's blue eyes were looking through the darkness at him. A mere trick of the fancy—as he knew even whilst it passed, it was gone in an instant, and he was driven through the lights and darkness of the town.

Mr. Harman received him in his drawing-room, where only firelight shone. He greeted him hospitably enough, though without any excuse for his own abrupt message, pressed him to have something to eat or drink, said something in praise of the dim light, and finally made his guest sit down in his own special armchair by the fire. Then he sat down himself opposite, and seemed absorbed in thought. Arlathnot was not in-

clined to speak, there was something silent in the loneliness of the room, the piano on which "the girls" had played, and the little trifles of theirs that lay still about the place, nor did the bent, silent face opposite, give much encouragement to speech. He looked into the fire and rested, in the silence and the gloom, with the thought of the night before still strong upon his mind. The voice of his companion was almost startling to him when at last it came.

"I have been reading the Bible this afternoon," said Mr. Harman with abruptness.

"Have you?" asked Arlathnot, with some unfeigned surprise.

"Yes. It's not often that I do that out of hours, you know. But there was something I wanted to look into to-day. I have been reading the Gospel according to St. John."

There was silence, for Arlathnot did not know in the least what remark to make on that. He waited to see what further words would come.

"I have been thinking," said Mr. Harman,

breaking the pause with extreme slowness after a while, "that if we had written it—His life—out of our own minds and heads, I mean, we should have taken pains to show that He loved all the world alike, that the partiality of men could not be found in Him. I suppose that if even out of the few who were round Him He could care for one the most, and like to have that one so close, so very close to Him, He would have us know that we should have our particular affections and our preferences too."

"It has been often said so," Arlathnot replied.

"And you believe it?"

"I do indeed. I have always thought that the love of one or two, and especially one or two at home with us, is more and must be more to us than all the world besides; that no fame or money can be as much to us as that. And I do not say these things less," he added, in a lower tone, "because it has never pleased God to grant me that blessing for myself."

"Ah! you would have cared for it," Mr. Harman said. After a pause, during which he had been looking into the fire, he went on slowly. "It seems to me that I have never through all my life cared much for anything of the sort at all. I suppose that sort of thing goes by disposition," he went on with slowness still. "I liked my wife in old times, as it was my duty to do, of course. We did not seem to make much difference to each other. And now, since she is gone, I have never given much thought to anyone, except of course to the girls, and—just a little—to you, Phil. But you always cared for my brother, you never would have much to do with me. I get lonely now sometimes. And you are all by yourself. I have been thinking that you might be more with me."

"*I?*" echoed Arlathnot, in an amazement that made the one syllable all that he could speak. But Mr. Harman caught up the word at once, and with more quickness now.

"Oh! I know what you would say," he said. "You will tell me that I could never

endure your charities and begging letters, and all that sort of thing. But I have been thinking that I might manage to put up with them. You ought not to be always by yourself, you look so ailing now. And I have always liked you, Phil."

Arlathnot said nothing for an instant, but kept his face turned away towards the fire. Something of a struggle, perhaps a distaste, was no doubt within his mind—his shy reserve, his lonely grief, the career of constant, unceasing usefulness he had chosen, had not much affinity with this—only beyond and above these things rested the fact that in the last few words was an appeal to him, and that sort of appeal too that he found it hardest to resist. If this also should be *meant*. After that scarcely perceptible pause he turned round his face again.

"Well, we'll think over it, at any rate," he said, with his brightest smile. "I get very lonely, too, sometimes."

They did think over it, and after some considerable while their thoughts resulted in

the fact that they spent part at least of each year together—an arrangement that was not without mutual annoyances, but that proved on the whole of benefit to both. Only Arlathnot found himself so little able to endure the constant reproaches of Lady Clinton, that he was compelled to give up a portion of his time as well to her, and in consequence to go out into society again.

There he met many of his old acquaintances, fell into former ways, and became in some degree at length a favourite as of old. They did not find, indeed, much difference in him—only that he was rather quieter and older than before—the signs of those two years of passionate grief, if there were any, could be detected only in his bleached hair, in some tired lines round his mouth, and in the little gold seals that his dead son once had worn. Few indeed amongst those he knew cared to comment much upon changes so slight as these.

Kittie's husband was presented with a large and rich living, to the joy of her rela-

tions. Arlathnot frequently met Mr. Harman's two eldest daughters in the fashionable world, and they seemed to flourish there.

There remains now but one other tale to conclude, and to that also only brief words need be given.

Holbis did not return again to London. Arlathnot made many efforts to find out where he had gone, but always in vain. At last, one day, some months after they had parted, when he was himself concluding arrangements with Mr. Harman, he received a letter that caused him to leave the town at once. And there, down in the country, in a little public-house by a river, stretched on a bed, and with a sheet over him, he found again the man he sought.

It did not take long for him to hear the rest. Holbis had come some weeks before to the little town, and taken lodgings there. He kept very much to himself, and was intimate with few. To those few he said that he had a little money, and had heard of some distant farming work to do. As a general

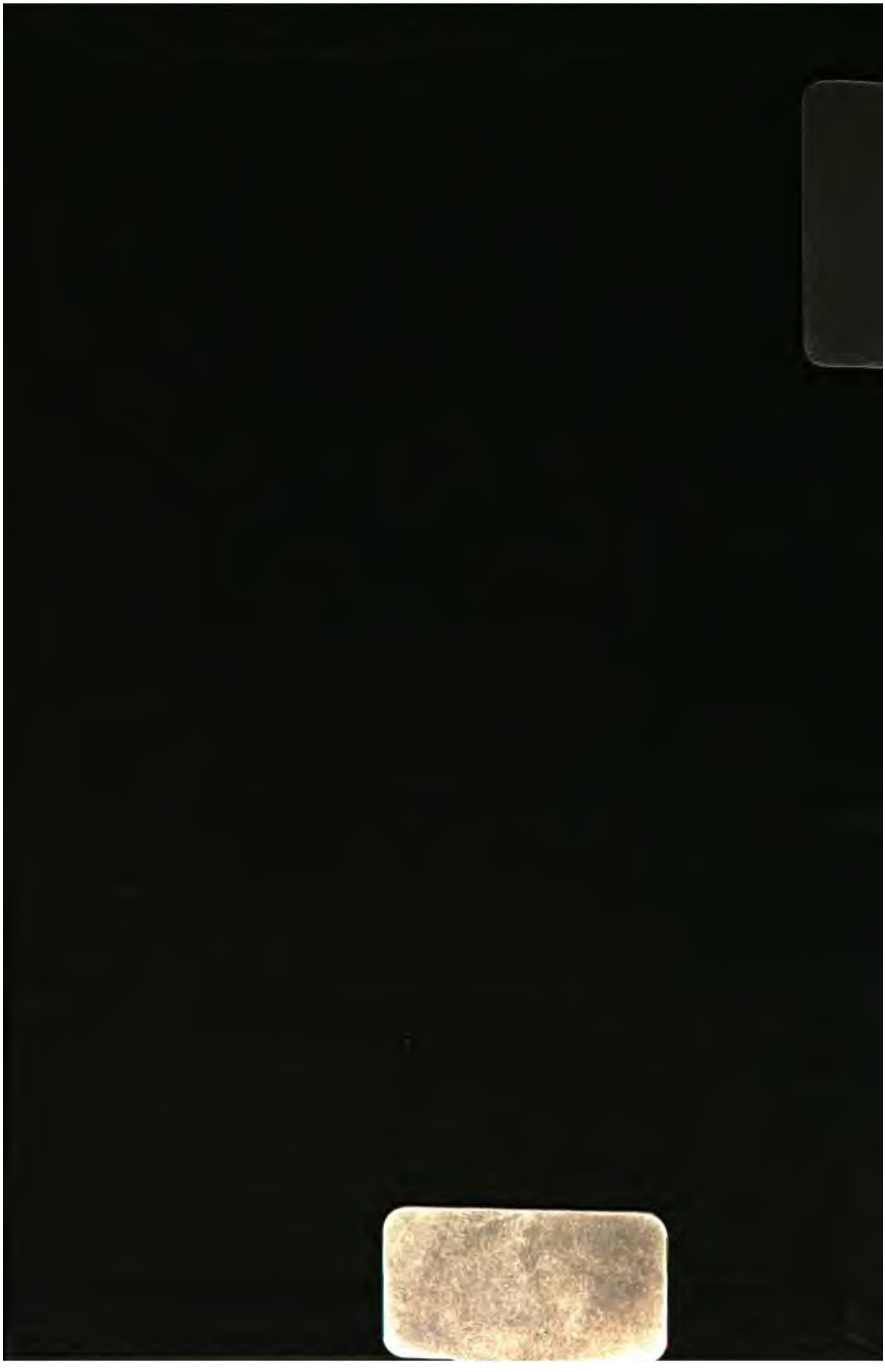
rule his behaviour was sober and well-conducted enough, but now and then—three times in the course of the seven weeks he lived there—he had been seized with a strange moodiness—touched with insanity, perhaps—and on these occasions he did not seem master of himself, and when the fit had lasted about two days would begin to drink as if he "'ould drink himself away." Then, when he had recovered, he would go about his gardening work again.

One day, in the interval of stupor that always succeeded his intemperance, he found his way into the midst of the town, and stood a whole morning upon a little crazy bridge that crossed the river near the station, leaning upon the railing as if he were asleep. Some who went by spoke to him, but he paid no heed to them. The railing was rotten and his weight bent or cracked it unperceived, it gave way at noon, and fell with him. There were many near to help, and he was himself, as all knew, a strong swimmer, but even the shock of his fall did not seem to rouse him,

and his head struck against one of the posts of the bridge as he rose. He was taken out immediately, and help brought, but he was unconscious, and died in a few hours without a word.

No one in the place knew who he was or where he had come from, but amongst his papers they found Arlathnot's address, and as a last resource they sent for him. If they had known, it must have seemed strange to them to think that the man whom he had hated and injured should be the only one found to do him service at the end.

They buried him in the London churchyard by the side of Meg.

"We need to believe in Christ," said Arlathnot, "when we know some of the stories in the world."

THE END.